

Success by Rozzlynn

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Summary:

When Alex claims the golden sun, the Wise One punishes him for everything he has done. Even knowing that he has made enemies, Alex struggles to make sense of the violence.

1. Success

Author's Note:

First posted on the gs kink meme. The plot includes a lot of extreme explicit violence, but it's still very much plot based fic. Thanks again to [Mireia](#) for beta reading.

Alex tried to keep to a steady pace as he strode through the scrubland surrounding Mt. Aleph, though the anticipation rising in his veins urged him to speed up. He had left the road a couple of hours ago that morning to avoid passing through Vale; the guardian village lay east of his current position, hidden by the foothills of the mountain. Most of the cultivated land lay further south, closer to the river where it was easier to irrigate. Valean children were forbidden from playing near Sol Sanctum; he had overheard that much the last time he had been here, helping ghosts set the stars in the sky. Now that he had come this far, he no longer had to worry about being seen.

He had run out of food three days ago, reluctant to carry too much weight between towns, and had been running on Ply ever since, the warm ache of healthy exertion in his limbs allowing him to ignore the hollow feeling in his stomach. It was satisfying, in a way, like fasting before the feast on winter solstice. Soon, he would have the whole world on a platter. He hadn't bothered to stop or eat upon reaching Vault yesterday evening; he knew from experience that he could keep this up a while longer before running out of Psynergy. Better to arrive at the peak a few days too soon and pass the time in meditation than to arrive half a minute too late.

As he walked, Alex wondered why the people of Vale bothered to put up with their own oppressive customs. It was the only town on the continent that allowed people to move in, but not out. He was well aware that backwater close-mindedness and a clannish sense of common purpose could foster a great deal of cohesion and pride in a community, alongside a disturbing tendency to scapegoat and ostracise away communal problems; he had grown up in Imil, after all. But Vale didn't make any sense however you looked at it.

Once, when he was a child, a group of merchants had stolen several heirlooms from Imil; the silver-inlaid staff in Mia's father's household which everyone knew dated from the founding of the Mercury Clan, the emerald ring in the old mayor's household which everyone knew would be used by his grandson to propose to the baker's daughter come midsummer, and so on. Within hours of the caravan's departure that morning, the thefts had been discovered; within another hour, twelve men and a handful of older boys from the village and the closest farmsteads had been gathered; by the time the group returned that evening it had almost doubled in size, as the news had spread and more locals had pitched in. One of the merchants had escaped a lynching by surrendering immediately; the others had not been so lucky. It had taken months for the gossip to start dying down; it had taken longer for all the new tools and clothes to start wearing out.

When Saturos and Menardi had stolen the elemental stars - the greatest treasures in the world, and the very reason for Vale's existence - they had been prepared to fight off any number of pursuers, and they had been followed by two Valean children. *Two children*. Plus Ivan, who was, as far as Alex could tell, a boy from Kalay who had gotten bored and lonely while fulfilling his own duties. How could the elders of Vale justify such apathy after their response to the Proxians'

initial request? They had all but condemned those boys, regardless of the strange turns that recent events had taken. What sort of evil could prompt such shamelessness in a community?

One thing was clear. There would be no place for Vale in his new world. He could think of plenty of better uses for the land below Sol Sanctum. A palace; a plaza; a fountain the height of the palace. A trio of fountains: water, wine and quicksilver tumbling through the air. Servants' quarters, of course, for any natives left in the area. (He wouldn't keep any Valeans in the harem; he disliked the local accent, and considered the old-world practice of removing slaves' tongues somewhat wasteful and cruel. It seemed like needless mutilation. He would have some of the male slaves gelded, though; Mia would be coming of age soon, and he intended to provide her with the best of everything, the way her father would have wanted.) There would be temples and monuments. Gallows and stables. Coliseums and libraries. Pleasure gardens and hunting grounds...

"Rise, storms!" Alex called out into the air around him, crisp and clear in his lungs as the sound rang out over the valleys below. "Rise up and unleash your might upon Vale and the foothills of Mt. Aleph!"

The breeze stirred his clothes, brisk as ever at this height, setting his breath racing to meet the gale that ought to greet him; lightning, hail and sleet in a cacophony, a crescendo, a cleansing...

Hazy sunlight glittered on the surface of the distant sea. There was barely a cloud in sight.

"That's odd..." Alex lowered his hands, getting puzzled. He could feel the heat within him, surging and sparking throughout his soul, almost brimming over in search of an outlet, and yet nothing seemed to be happening. "I should have limitless power... So why can't I call up a simple storm?"

He sensed a formidable presence manifesting behind him, and swung round to see. A large boulder hung in the air, blinking slowly. Its vast blue eye was focused on him. A shiver ran down his spine; he had seen his share of monsters, but they were nothing compared to this entity. It looked... sentient. He remembered glimpsing something like it in Sol Sanctum, off in the distance, though it had been hard to see far in the dimly lit chamber as the place started to collapse; he had mainly been aware of it as a magnificently powerful source of Psynergy. Up close, it was a little too magnificent.

"Wh-Who are you?"

{{ I am the Wise One, }} it informed him, its telepathic voice resounding in his skull, every syllable imparted with an air of incontrovertible truth, {{ and you are scum. }}

Alex stared at it, his mind frozen for a moment. Then the words rang a bell: the Wise One, the ancient guardian said to have existed to watch over Vale and the elemental stars. It really was leagues above the monsters littering the area. Now that he had surpassed the gods, he ought to be able to defeat a local demigod. Pulling himself together, he tried to pretend it had never intimidated him in the first place. "If you are trying to anger me, have a little taste of the power I have attained!"

Raising a hand and trying to focus his Psynergy, he felt it jolting and spitting through the air between them, enveloping the Wise One in light. He'd been aiming for an ice attack, but, well... at least something was happening this time. The power swelled and surged through his mind, electric and exhilarating, and the Wise One started to sway in the air. That was a good sign, wasn't it?

Suddenly, the power cut out and waned back to a spark within him. Alex staggered at the change, struck by a splitting headache and an unexpected degree of fatigue. Closing his eyes against the pain for a moment, he realized the problem with trying to take anyone on immediately after obtaining the golden sun. It reminded him of the downsides of learning Psynergy while growing up; he'd spent years figuring out his abilities and reflexes, putting up with the strain of channeling powers that his body wasn't used to, finding his limits and gradually improving. Now that he had obtained the Alchemy he desired, he would have to face another psychic adolescence. If he'd known that he would be taking a risk, he wouldn't have been so quick to start a fight...

Still, his power was supposed to be infinite. He ought to be able to win this, somehow. Alex glared up at the Wise One, hissing through his teeth. What was it trying to achieve, hovering there in mocking silence...?

As soon as it had his attention again, the floating eyeball started glowing bluish-white with Psynergy. Alex felt himself lifted into the air, a crushing pressure settling round his chest; a second later, searing pain ran through him, burning waves flowing up his spine, constantly building in intensity until he lost awareness of everything beyond the rising agony.

When he was dropped to the ground, completely disoriented, he had no idea how long the ordeal had lasted, but by that point he could do nothing about it except lie there, gasping blindly as he waited for his darkened vision to clear.

After a minute or two, Alex turned his head to see the Wise One still hovering in place. He'd been helpless against its attack. How could he be so outmatched?

"How...?"

It blinked. It floated. It didn't seem as though it was about to attack him again. Alex tried to catch his breath.

"I should be all-powerful! How can you...?"

{{ You are not all-powerful, Alex. Your power has its limits, as does your life. }}

That didn't make any sense. The golden sun conferred immortality upon its wielder.

The Wise One started to glow again, and Alex tensed up, but it merely spoke to him after a few seconds of silence. {{ It would have done, if it were whole. I imbued the Mars Star with some of the power of the forming golden sun. That portion rests even now in the hands of young Isaac. }}

It had read his mind. It had *read his mind*. He had no trouble keeping Jupiter Adepts from doing that. He was laid out before the Wise One, all his thoughts laid bare... No. *No*. It had stolen the power he needed, the future he dreamed of, to grace the dirty hands of the brat who'd murdered and hounded his allies? Felix had seemed keen to reconcile with Isaac at Jupiter Lighthouse. Now that either Karst or Felix had proved successful at Mars Lighthouse, did Isaac have

any living enemies left? If so, they wouldn't stand a chance... Though they might be able to weaken him, making it easier to finish him off. That would be useful.

{{ Isaac fought under my direct orders, }} the Wise One told him, as if that made a difference. {{ How many people have died by your hand? }}

"Do you want an estimate? The figure lies somewhere between five and fifty, most likely." Alex couldn't see what that had to do with anything. Everyone had to fight for survival sometimes. He had left most of the battles to the Proxians, but there had occasionally been situations that had called for his participation; the army of non-Adepts approaching Venus Lighthouse, in particular, would have overwhelmed Jenna and Kraden had he not confronted it. Perhaps he had been a little ruthless -- but, honestly, he'd been in a hurry. He hadn't lingered afterwards to check who was dead and who was still alive, to chase down stragglers or heal the wounded; his aim had been to defeat them, not to finish them off or let the consequences of their foolishness keep him away from those with political importance. Yes, in retrospect, he knew he could have taken the time to minimize the casualties without placing Jenna and Kraden in mortal danger, but... well, what did it matter? He had not been in the wrong; he had no regrets. His opponents should all have fled from him if they wanted to survive; hadn't it been obvious that he was a cut above mortal men?

The Wise One was using Psynergy again, but if it was reading his mind, it clearly didn't intend to dignify his opinions with a response. Alex flexed his fingers experimentally. The pain had mostly faded. He had to get out of here, the sooner the better.

A tremor shook the mountain, and Alex tried to flatten himself against the ground as it rolled beneath him, though that didn't change his posture much. He wasn't far from the edge of the peak, and he knew exactly how steep the cliff below would be on the way down...

He was freed from that worry as the Wise One lifted him again, though that could hardly be called an improvement in his situation. Staring at the sky, he listened to its next words and wondered whether a voice infused with anger or hatred could ever compete with that flat, leaden certainty.

{{ The heavens and earth are changing, Alex. }}

It wasn't hurting him this time, just exerting a numb pressure on his mind; he felt his thoughts slip out of his grasp, and tried in vain to cling to consciousness.

{{ I will show you the limits of your power... }}

Alex woke as an aftershock shifted the scree beneath him, and was relieved to feel it digging into his back; he had to be back on the ground. Sitting up, he glanced around, and was able to confirm this. The sun was only slightly lower in the sky; he could only have been unconscious for an hour or two. Most of the mountain seemed to be missing, but so did the Wise One; he wasn't going to puzzle over that until he'd gotten out of here.

{{ You're awake. }}

It manifested behind him, again. Alex climbed to his feet, cursing its theatrics even as his blood ran cold. He didn't turn around. He couldn't keep it from toying with him until he'd gotten the hang of his powers, and he didn't want to

provoke it, but he felt stubborn all the same. None of this made sense.

"Yes, I'm awake." He made sure to sound calm, though he doubted his tone of voice would have much effect on this opponent. "What do you have planned?"

{{ What do *you* have planned? }}

Everything he didn't want the Wise One to know about came to mind. Alex held back from lying to its face, knowing that it would know if he tried. It had been so much fun fantasizing earlier... Would the fact that he *hadn't* wanted Valeans in the harem count in his favor?

{{ You seek to use the world for your own pleasure. }}

"That would be one way of looking at it." Alex kept his eyes on the skyline, trying not to contradict the Wise One too aggressively. He'd had standards, hadn't he? He'd saved the world, and he planned to unite it. Shouldn't the growth of civilization count as a noble goal, no matter how much he meant to enjoy it?

{{ Show me your noble intentions. Show me what civilization means to you. }}

For a few beautiful seconds, he thought the Wise One had decided to let him go.

Then he felt his feet move, turning him to face his interrogator. His mind tried to compensate for the unexpected movement, and he expected to stagger, but his muscles no longer seemed to be taking orders from his brain.

As he stood beneath the Wise One's impassive gaze, Alex's left hand hitched up the hem of his tunic, and his right hand slid his waistband down to his thighs before wrapping itself round his cock. The worn leather of his glove rubbed along its length; he could feel it starting to stiffen, responding to the familiar stimulation.

He wasn't doing this. He couldn't break eye contact with the Wise One, couldn't still his own hand, couldn't keep his breath from quickening. If it could do this to him, it could do anything. *Would* do anything. Every part of his body would obey.

It wouldn't finish. Why? It shouldn't know him so well, how to drag it out, why, *why* did it have to watch...?

Flesh spasming in his hand. Semen seeping through his fingers. His eyes stopped focusing on the Wise One and stared through it, so it must have let him go. He still couldn't move. Had it really...?

The Wise One teleported to a space higher in the air. With only wasteland in front of him, Alex managed to get his breathing under control. He pulled his clothes back into place, then took his gloves off and hurled them away; they threw up a small cloud of dust as they landed amidst the rubble. Shock gave way to fury; his mood was veering from one impotent state to another, and his awareness of the process somehow wasn't enough to arrest it. His throat burned; his voice burned.

"Y-you... filth! You bastard! I will kill you, I swear, I will rip you limb from limb, eye from... pieces of eye... You cannot -
!"

A loud rumbling drowned out his words. Three pillars of stone rose up from the rubble, equally spaced around him,

and started to melt and flow like wax. The Wise One reshaped the molten rock before his eyes, giving form to a trio of dragons with blunt, scaly snouts, densely muscled limbs, and tails the length of their bodies again, ridged with spikes. Each stood six feet tall on a heavy pair of hind legs. When they opened their reptilian eyes, their irises were the exact same shade of blue as the Wise One's.

{{ Show me your power. }}

Alex hissed and struck out at the closest dragon, the same surge of light as before tearing free of his mind and surrounding the beast. It stepped back and hissed back at him, sinking to all fours; the fizzing light made a mess of the pattern of scales that met his eyes. Then the dragon snorted and shook itself, a rippling movement passing through all the muscles in its back and flipping the end of its tail in an irritated swish. It started towards him, its limbs strangely refracted by the mess of light, but not appreciably hindered. Alex spun round, and saw the other dragons circling him lazily; as he turned his back to it, the first one reared up again and swung its tail in a slow arc, thumping him across his shoulders with enough force to send him to his knees. The debris bit into his bare hands as he shoved himself round, lunging at the creature. He rammed into a chest as tough as solid stone, heard his shoulder crack and gave it no thought, but when his enemy lowered its jaw and bit down on that shoulder, its teeth sinking into the flesh for purchase and a shake of its head wrenching the bone from the socket, the Wise One intervened.

{{ Enough. }}

As the dragon released him, Alex once again found that his body was not under his control. He knelt, his left hand reaching out to rub at the sheathed organ between the

creature's legs while his right arm hung uselessly by his side. His mind struggled to comprehend this turn of events, the clouding buzz of unprecedented fury gradually subsiding as his body slowed itself down. The skin was slick; waxy scales along its thighs, varnished rock jutting out, dew slicking the surface. Sweat, not dew. He leaned in to lick it off, and the movement jolted his shoulder, pain making itself known to him. It snapped things into focus. Appreciative rumbling noises sounded from above him, and the hard flesh slid past his lips. He wanted to throw up; instead, his mouth started moving as his hand worked the rest of the shaft encouragingly.

He hadn't known how to do this; he'd never had to do anything like this before; that meant it was the Wise One who knew how to give a good blow job. To think omniscience truly included all knowledge...

The knowledge that this wasn't his choice, that it wasn't really his fault, was little comfort as he tasted bitter fluid accumulating in his mouth. The substance became saltier as it reached its release; it truly was salt of the earth, he supposed, though it didn't act it. After a few seconds, it pulled out, and he found himself tilting his head back, able to hazily see more of it landing on his nose and across his eyes. Though he probably shouldn't have been surprised by all of this, his mind hadn't been working quite fast enough to expect it.

Once the dragon had finished with him, it retreated to the same distance as its brothers, leaving Alex kneeling in the dust. His breath broke apart, coming to him in thick, sobbing gasps, and he realized his body was under his control again - or at least, not under the Wise One's control. Raising his good arm, he tried to wipe the gunk from his face with his

sleeve, and he realized he was shaking - though that didn't honestly make things all that much worse, at this point.

{{ Try again. Show me your power. }}

The dragons started circling again, and Alex forced himself to his feet, using his left hand to keep his right arm pressed close to his body. He shouldn't have tried to fight them physically; that had been idiotic. Focusing on the spark of Alchemy at his core, he tried to cast it into the shape of a familiar element. Years ago, he had read about the waterjet tools used in the workshops and mines of the ancient world. They had been elegant devices capable of emitting water at high enough pressure to cut through layers of rock or steel. Since then, he had measured his own Psynergy against that standard, and while he hadn't yet reached it, he'd been getting damn close in recent months.

He felt his new Psynergy straining and sparking in his mind, trying to release as another offshoot of its default form, and he kept struggling to direct it. Still circling, the dragons awaited his move. Water. Water. *Water.*

Something came loose. There was water as far as he could see, surrounding them all. Caught by surprise, he was inhaling as it appeared, and he immediately started choking on the water that rushed in. Bubbles streamed in front of his eyes. The dragons kept up their pacing underwater, dense and immune. Alex clawed at his throat, kicking off from the ground as he struggled. Blue hair streaked with white swayed around him, ghostly in the filtered light, only to fade from sight as his eyes drifted closed.

{{ Enough. }}

The Wise One's voice rang out, and the bulk of the water vanished. Alex fell heavily to the ground, his clothes still

sodden, the stones slippery with damp. Coughing and retching even after he'd finished throwing up, he lay on his side, aching all over. He had never before felt so spent. When he heard the next dragon approach, he struggled to speak, knowing what was coming next. He couldn't lose control again, not now, not again, he couldn't have lost another round...

"N-no! You can't... c-can't make me...!"

{{ Very well. I will not make you do anything. }}

The beast's tail curled around his chest, dragging him to his knees.

{{ How will you manage on your own? }}

The ridge of its tail lay flat against his stomach, though it twisted and cut into his back as it encircled him. Vision still blurry, he could barely see the creature shifting in front of him, but he clenched his jaw, trying to resist the pain as much as anything else. It dug its claws into his side, eliciting a gasp; his head was swimming, he couldn't keep up... keep track... all the lights... Damn, it hurt...

A length of living rock entered his mouth; he bit down, and couldn't make a dent. It pushed past his meagre resistance, and he started choking again, scratching at the dragon's leg until his fingers bled, each thrust searing his throat and setting black spots spinning behind his eyes.

He'd stopped fighting by the time the dragon finished with him. It let his semi-conscious form fall to the ground, then retreated to its place in the circle.

For quite a while, Alex watched the shadows glitter. They seemed to chase each other through the hoops and crevices.

Didn't they get dizzy?

Raspy breathing met his ears. Vaguely recognizing it as his own, he kept it going until he could feel it. For all that it hurt, it did feel good to breathe. And to lie down. The damp rocks were cold against his face and neck.

{{ One more time. Show me your power. }}

What?!

Alex opened his eyes, focusing on the scree stretched out before him. Flecks of blood nearby. Maybe he could move if he tried, but he couldn't win. This was getting senseless. Couldn't it tell...?

{{ I thought you were going to rip me limb from limb, }} the floating eyeball told him, perfectly deadpan.

He tried to speak, and managed a whisper. He was sure it could hear. "Nh... n-not... today."

{{ I will not reschedule. }}

Alex quickly suppressed an internal tirade of curses against his mind-reading tormentor. "But... this... Why...?"

{{ You have brought this punishment upon yourself. If you must still ask why, then you have not been paying attention. }}

"I - "

{{ Enough. }}

A shadow fell over him as the third dragon approached, its footfalls crunching the rubble behind him. He tried to reach for his Psynergy, but he was still completely tapped. The

Wise One had called an end to the conversation, but he had no other recourse. "Please, I - "

The dragon rendered him incapable of finishing that sentence as it clawed away the back of his clothes, gouging bloody gashes through his flesh from his shoulders to his thighs. Hot, dry breath met the back of his neck as its forelegs settled in the debris either side of his arms. Though he willed his body to move, it seemed to have given up on him. Only his breath told him that he was not physically under the Wise One's control by the way it hitched and shuddered as the dragon's tail slid beneath his hips.

The beast snarled as it sated itself at a punishing pace. It tore at the wounds along his back, and its tail coiled around him until it started snapping ribs. Even through the agony, Alex could feel his mind fixating on the sensation of blood seeping down his legs. He couldn't live through this. If he was going to die, he wanted to die now. He had lost. Let it end...

Though Alex hated himself for it, a part of him wished he was still under the Wise One's control. The things it had made him do had been worse, all things considered, than the violence that he had actually been able to fight against, but at least they hadn't hurt. Hoping and dreading that if the Wise One sensed him giving in, it would heal him enough to make him participate more actively, or end this now, or add a fourth round, or completely ignore him, Alex wasn't even sure what he'd have to think for the Wise One to think he'd given in. Did it need to believe that he would submit to anything before it would grant him death instead? What did it want? Why...?

Somehow he was still conscious when it finished. Perhaps the blood loss was sending his mind down strange paths,

but he found himself morbidly wondering whether the creature's seed was fit for purpose – whether these monsters would be able to mate if the Wise One had created a female, leading to the propagation of the species around the area. Probably not, considering it wouldn't want a population of invincible rapist dragons plaguing Valean land...

The dragon's tail rolled Alex as it unwound, leaving him sprawled on his back. The creature stepped away a pace, then waited as the others approached.

Alex stared blearily up at the three dragons looming over him. One reached down to nuzzle at his chest, its hot breath reaching him through the layer of sticky fabric still clinging to his skin. Another leaned over him to lick the blood from its brother's scales, resting its forelimbs on the ground either side of his thighs. Barely breathing, Alex didn't dare move. He didn't dare think.

At some invisible signal, all three dragons stood tall and fell still, looking for all the world like a set of statues carved in obscene detail and erected in the back of beyond. The breeze picked up, and the creatures dissolved into sand, disintegrating in moments. No trace of them remained in Alex's field of vision. The Wise One continued to hover nearby, out of sight, and its presence once again monopolized his attention.

The golden sun had made him more powerful than ever before; he'd felt it, raw Alchemy settling into him, burning him up, firing him up, making anything possible. If he'd learnt to work with it, if he'd been given the time, he'd have been unstoppable, he knew it. But here and now... He'd fought so hard. Pleaded and struggled. Used himself up. And the Wise One had stepped in as if on a whim, erasing its proxies in less time than it had taken to make them. It had

said 'one more time', and it had kept its word, ending it here – proving beyond all doubt that it outmatched him a thousand times over.

He'd been too weak. Even at the time, he'd been disgusted that any part of his mind would invite the Wise One to guide his hands again. Why couldn't it have let him drown? He'd been so close.

{{ I do not interfere in the affairs of mankind. }}

That was, Alex reflected, more or less the last thing he'd expected to hear from the entity that had just beaten and raped him to within an inch of his life. What was it trying to do – kill him through absurdism? Brainwash him into forgetting this?

{{ The power you attained today has set you above the paradigm of human abilities. Now that I have dealt with you, it will be possible for your peers to decide your fate. We will await their arrival. }}

... Huh. Nice of it to let him know. Could he perhaps opt out of that, and die before anyone else saw him in this state?

It didn't reply. Either it had stopped reading his mind, or it wasn't going to offer him an easy way out. Since he had no choice in the matter, he tried to redirect his mind instead, putting a rather desperate amount of effort into it and meeting with partial success.

Maybe it would all work out somehow. There were Venus Adepts around here, weren't there? Maybe he would be found by a sweet-natured healer girl who would Cure him until he could walk, then help him back to her house. Maybe she would let him rest there for a few days, after convincing her neighbors to turn a blind eye. He wondered whether she

would even make rye bread, if he asked. People south of the Goma Range only ever seemed to serve wheat bread. It was so bland, it didn't taste like real food. They must have rye, since they'd served rye beer at the Inn... Alex wasn't hungry, so much as nostalgic. He didn't think he could possibly feel hungry until his insides felt less shredded.

It occurred to him that most humans in his position would be catatonic by now. Shock, asphyxiation, blood loss, lacerations, internal... decimation... And the Wise One had effectively told him that he could have defeated any human, if it hadn't confronted him first. Perhaps when it had said that it would 'show him the limits' of his improved powers, it had been talking about physical resilience and pain tolerance as well as offensive Psynergy. It had certainly taken a lot to push him past those limits. There wasn't much he could do for himself right now, without healing Psynergy on hand, but he might be able to do something about the dislocated shoulder.

On his fifth attempt, he managed to swing his left arm across his body. Suppressing the surge of nausea and pain caused by the movement, he fumbled for his shoulder and found that his fingers were still too raw and achy to feel much. He couldn't pull it back into place – he'd better just rest, and try again later. Assuming he could regain any strength by lying here. More likely he'd weaken, left to the elements...

Alex was sure of one thing. If he got out of this alive, his army was going to slaughter all opposition without ever raping anyone.

It seemed to make perfect sense.

The Wise One's presence shifted slightly closer, though still out of sight, drawing his full attention again. A strange

electric sensation started rolling over his lower body, Psynergy prickling across places he'd really hoped the Wise One was finished with. As far as he could tell, this seemed to be its way of stroking him while they waited. Wishing his body still had the energy to gag, he fixed his gaze on the sky and tried to wait it out without thinking anything that would displease the Wise One any further.

A few minutes and an eternity later, Alex heard footsteps and cart wheels approaching across the rubble. The Wise One finally left him alone, teleporting to a space closer to the noise. Turning his head, Alex watched as a couple of men approached the Wise One, leading a small horse-drawn cart that was half full of salvage; it looked as though the village had suffered some damage from the mountain's collapse. The men seemed angry and grim, but not surprised; the Wise One must have summoned them here. More salt of the earth – though he didn't suppose they would act it, either. The horse had the look of an agricultural animal borrowed for work outside its normal routine, struggling with the uneven terrain. Its hide was marked with fresh weals; its handlers seemed to be low on patience.

It suddenly occurred to Alex that it might not have been apathy that had kept the adults of Vale at home these past months. If the Wise One had ordered them to send out only two children, they would have done so. He couldn't imagine anyone standing up to the Wise One for long. They could have been perfectly furious about the theft of the elemental stars and the damage done to their village, and perfectly eager to punish the thieves themselves. Still, not many people had seen him when he was last here. If he told these two that he was someone completely unrelated to all of this, a travelling healer who had noticed Mt Aleph's unusual activity and had been ambushed by monsters after changing course in order to offer the Valeans his aid...

The men stopped and looked up at the Wise One once they reached it. They spent a while standing there, as if listening. The Wise One had to be telling the Valeans the truth about him – the man who had killed somewhere between five and fifty people, and had come here to destroy Vale. The facts sounded awful when he put them that way, but they weren't, really. They wouldn't understand, but he could always... He could still...

The Wise One disappeared. Its presence vanished. It was gone. It was really gone. He felt dizzy with relief, hit by a wave of exhaustion now that the greatest threat had left. The Wise One was gone. The villagers were approaching him, and there wasn't much he could do beyond begging their forgiveness and assuring them of Isaac, Garet and Jenna's safety. He could tell them about Kyle and the others, possibly. Did they care about Kraden? Maybe it would all work out. Maybe it wouldn't. The Wise One was gone, it was gone, it was really, truly gone...

As the Valean men reached him, Alex realized he had to start speaking. That proved to be something of a challenge, but he gave it his best shot. "Th-thisss - "

One of the Valeans kicked him in the head, shutting him up quite effectively. Alex closed his eyes, lying still and trying not to tense up again. It hurt far too much – and even worse was the fact that when his body tried to move, it didn't feel as though his muscles were really responding beyond jarring his nerves into protest. Too much blood lost. Muscles too torn. He couldn't move. The Valeans were laughing and speaking, but he couldn't catch half the words. Telepathy had been far clearer. Far more immediate.

He heard something rip. Fabric. When he felt someone gagging him, shoving a knot of bloodstained cloth in his

mouth and tying it off round the back of his neck, his eyes flew open; when the Valeans started stripping him of the rest of the remains of his clothes, cutting away the heavy fabric, he stared past them, off into the distance, an unfocused view of nothing in particular.

Distantly, he noticed himself thinking that it was a good thing he was too exhausted to flinch from their touch, since that would probably have provoked them. His disgust at that thought was more immediate, but still futile. They rolled him onto his front, and he felt the knife grate against bone. If anything, he would actually rather communicate through even an involuntary sign of distaste. *Above the paradigm of human abilities.* Such a sick joke.

The knife slid between his ribs, deeper than the dragon's claws had ventured, and cut a path beyond the edge of the wound. The villagers wiped the flat of the blade against his skin, then shifted him onto his back again. One hand passed close to his face, leaving him with an image of callused fingers, dirty nails, a plain wedding ring, and less blood than he'd expected. Why was it easier to wish he could flinch than to imagine he could stop them? No matter how carelessly they treated him, no matter how little interest they had in hearing the full story, they would still be the ones to explain his fate to their neighbors, if they chose to mention him at all. Though he didn't have the energy to sob, Alex's vision blurred with tears, to his further disgust.

Until then, he had been trying to hold on to the hope that his encounter with the Wise One need not mean anything in the long term, should he survive it; that he could write it off as a nasty bit of business between demigods, and resume his place in the human world; that once he was back among other people, he would still be the man he had always been. How slim were his chances? He couldn't even put into words

all the ways in which this was not how things ought to be, not how things had ever been; for one thing, he had always ordered people to wash their hands before placing them anywhere near open wounds. Risking death against a mystical guardian was one thing, no matter how brutal the fight, but what was this? Callused fingers and dirty nails. Pure human contact, in all the wrong places.

One of the Valeans left for a minute, and came back with rope. Though Alex was distantly aware of the two of them speaking as they moved him, laying him out on the ground behind the cart and lifting his arms, it was only when they started tying his wrists together that he realized what they might well mean to do. If he were dragged along the ground all the way back to the village... How fast could they go? Images of his own broken body by the end of the journey swam through his mind; so much more flesh scraped from his bones, a bloodied mess of a face worn down to the skull wherever the rocks caught it – would the power of the golden sun keep him conscious throughout that, too? He stared up at his captors, wide-eyed in an effort to plead with them, too horrified to go without trying to communicate somehow.

After a bit of talking and snickering, they seemed to change their minds, though they still didn't seem to be acting out of mercy. They unbound his wrists and dragged him past the cart, and then one of them reached beneath the horse and started jerking it off, petting its flank as it whined and stamped. Alex stared up at the sight in total, desperate incomprehension. He couldn't think why they would be doing that. Couldn't think why at all.

Keeping tight hold of the horse's reigns, the Valeans lifted Alex and tied him to its underside. His head lolled back beneath its neck, and he closed his eyes, trying not to think

anything he didn't need to think. Until he'd been pressed up close to all that warm fur, the heat bristling across his front, he hadn't fully realized how cold he'd been getting. The ropes hurt, but they weren't exactly unendurable. He tried not to think about how he must look, or where the others were standing now, or what they were *doing*...

The horse's owners finished their task, then tightened up the ropes. When they urged it forward into a walk, Alex made himself keep breathing, trying to ignore the stabbing pain that grew with each step, ever deeper, oh gods how much further...

Trying to calm himself down, relatively speaking, Alex focused on getting angry at the Valeans, though he knew anger would be an exhausting emotion if he used it for long. *Those... sick... fucks...* They had to have found the most humiliating way of dragging him back to Vale. There ought to be an award. Please let their kinsmen be horrified, let them be better people, if he was to live to find out...

The sound of the ground beneath the horse's hooves changed as the terrain went from tumbled rock to grassy earth, though it took the ball of misery beneath its body a while to notice.

The journey went on. Surely Vale hadn't been this far... He didn't dare open his eyes. Eventually, they seemed to slow down, voices raised all around them. Body heat all around. Hands pulled him free, and then he was allowed to collapse on the ground, with no physical demands on his attention. Someone started casting Cure, then stopped, and the voices got louder. While all the sounds drifted around, Alex wondered whether he ought to think it pathetic to be so relieved that it was over when it wasn't yet, in so many

ways; yes he probably ought to, it really was pathetic, but still...

The respite only lasted a few minutes before the voices seemed to reach an agreement. Alex forced his eyes open in time to see a couple of men pull a hardwood pillory board, snapped free of its post, out of the cart. They just *had* to have salvaged *that*.

Alex managed to notice, while he was dragged across the grass, that the surrounding structures were all canvas tents, that there were crates and supplies piled up everywhere, and that there weren't any well-trodden paths along the ground. It didn't look as if this was Vale. Had the village been completely destroyed? Damn, no wonder they were angry... They stopped beneath a birch tree that had an unlit lantern hanging from one of the lower branches. Still too early in the afternoon to need it. He tried not to pay too much attention to his situation as the villagers opened the pillory and shoved his neck and wrists into the indents – the hinges squeaked, why did hinges always squeak? The board smelled like aspen... Once they'd gotten the thing closed and the latch set, the Valeans pulled him almost to his feet, laying one end of the board flat against the tree trunk, about a foot below head height. One of the Venus Adepts cast Grow, and the trunk swelled and spread over that end of the board until it was held fast; Alex glimpsed the Psynergy at the edge of his vision. Then the villagers left, going back to the tasks that had been interrupted by his arrival.

For a few minutes more, Alex managed to stay conscious; he thought someone might come to question him, or execute him, or at least tell him what to expect. Nothing of the sort happened. They seemed to have left him alone for now. He hadn't gotten any sort of rest from the wait earlier, not with the Wise One's Psynergy running over him, tangible as

touch. He didn't care if he fell into shock rather than sleep – it was about time, to be honest. Physiologically, he no longer knew what he was. It was insane that he should still be this lucid. He let his focus drift.

The pain became more of a shape than a feeling. Drifting loose of it, there were no directions. Vast plane of sheer feverish heat, he could barely sense a thousandth of the surface, the slope – icicles, stalactites, eventually, he knew, somewhere. Vapor gathered and he could see the difficulty, billowing above, beside, the surface; there was more, gradually, and it still seemed terribly sparse, but he hadn't been there for long. It accumulated with each passing moment. When a droplet finally condensed, it hissed and spat, rolling down the heat, and he wanted to lick it free, taste the wellspring, but he couldn't seem to manifest as movement. The trail fogged over again, but he knew all the same when it reached the end and fell away; the vertigo shook him almost awake, and the scrape of the pillory against his neck brought him the rest of the way as he started to cough convulsively, though it was only a few seconds before the wracking movement exhausted itself and left him limp again. The pain seemed slightly lessened, or more distant, he couldn't tell which, but there was fresh blood in his mouth. He couldn't focus, but he couldn't get back to that strange state of mind. With the bizarre feeling that if he was left alone for long enough, he might naturally heal, Alex continued waiting in a state slightly less removed from full consciousness, inescapably aware of the pain and the buzz of noise from his surroundings.

When he sensed an intense human presence nearby, he opened his eyes. A red haired young woman was approaching him, carrying a large steel pan; he couldn't see over the rim, but she had her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and her hands covered in flame, keeping the contents

steaming hot. From the redness round her eyes, it looked like she'd been crying recently, though she seemed furious right now. Alex wondered in a disinterested way whether she was bringing food, though something about the situation seemed incongruous with that idea.

When she threw the boiling water over him, he saw the movement without understanding it; a few seconds later, though his mind had unfrozen from the initial shock and the searing pain made it quite obvious what had happened, he still had trouble coming to grips with the idea that *she had come here just to throw boiling water at him*. Though she couldn't have known his thoughts, she didn't let him doubt her intentions for long, thwacking him across the head with the pan before leaving. Alex tried to breathe as he waited it out, feeling strangely stunned that someone who had never even met him could hate him so thoroughly.

Alex soon lost track of time again, trying to rest as best he could despite it all. It was a few hours before his thoughts came together again, as he gradually became aware of a few conversations within earshot. The camp had gotten busier; after listening to his surroundings for a while, Alex managed to piece together the day's events from the Valeans' perspectives. The Wise One had told them to evacuate the village that morning, warning them of a catastrophe around Mt. Aleph. It wasn't clear how much else it had told them; while some people were encouraging each other to be patient and optimistic, others were taking the mountain's collapse as a sign of Isaac and Garet's failure, and weren't expecting to ever see those boys again.

The mayor and his family had organized the evacuation as well as anyone could have expected on such short notice, by common consensus; only those who had not been found in time had been injured or lost. A temporary sanctum had

been set up somewhere in the camp, and the wounded were being treated there. A few search parties had been sent out along with the salvage teams; most of these groups had now returned, though only the salvage trips had met with any success. Most of the Venus Adepts had been sent out to the orchards, where they'd used Grow to force an early harvest of cherries and redcurrants. They were determined to trade with other towns for supplies in order to rebuild; nobody seemed willing to consider accepting much charity or integrating with other settlements. One of the groups sent out to Vault earlier in the day had already returned, and the reconstruction would officially begin tomorrow.

His pillory had been set up at the edge of an open space somewhere in the middle of the camp; the mayor had been informed, and had condoned it, though Alex couldn't tell whether this was now an official punishment or whether the mayor was simply allowing the villagers to do as they pleased. Most people were ignoring him, and those who commented in passing didn't sound terribly sympathetic. A large tent nearby seemed to be serving as a makeshift tavern; people were gathering there to eat and drink. Some were only there to drink. They hadn't had time to pack up everything in Vale, but they'd had time enough to save the alcohol. How typical.

While he was awaiting his fate, Alex's thoughts turned inevitably to the Wise One. Would he be in a better position now if he'd started pleading for mercy the minute it appeared, rather than attacking it the minute it insulted him? It claimed to have assaulted him for two reasons; to punish him, and to give the people of this world a chance to stop him. Since it didn't seem to consider his ambitions worthwhile, it probably would have beaten him down whatever he said or did. Could there have been any way to claim the golden sun without ending up here? The last age

of Alchemy had ended when it became clear that unbridled war would destroy the planet; Alchemy had been sealed away as a last resort. If the planet was to survive the coming age of regrowth, it needed an immortal, invincible god-king to unite every nation, quell every rebellion, and ensure that succession would never become an issue. Only then could war be permanently suppressed. He'd had no choice but to claim the golden sun. As a humanitarian, he had no choice but to rule over everything or die trying. And if he were to fulfill that role for the sake of the planet, didn't he deserve to take whatever he wanted in return? Emperors in the past had kept slaves without getting told off by any damn floating eyeballs, unless the historians had really been skimping on the details...

The Wise One had claimed that he sought to use the world to pleasure himself, and then it had asked him to demonstrate what civilization meant to him. And then it had made him... enact a sick parody of intimacy with oneself. It had been telling him that his 'noble intentions' amounted to nothing more than wank. It hadn't been asking him anything. When it had ordered him to show off his power, it had been telling him that he was powerless. Again and again. And when it had asked him how many people had died by his hand... Did the Wise One see him as a man who would sacrifice any number of lives in order to get off on his own success? It couldn't be. It didn't know what it was talking about. He never fought without good reason; the fact that it was a bit of a power rush was beside the point. It didn't bias his decisions. How could a mind reader get it so badly wrong?

The Wise One was right about one thing; he was powerless against it. If his 'peers' decided not to kill him, would it see that decision as a human affair and let him recover? Or

would it continue to 'punish' him for as long as it thought he deserved it?

He would have to cross that bridge if and when he came to it.

Alex was fairly sure he had recovered enough energy to speak, if only someone would let him. The more he overheard, though, the less likely it seemed that he stood any chance of talking his way out of this. When the village elders had sent Isaac and Garet to retrieve the elemental stars, they hadn't been intimidated by the Wise One into picking a couple of children to recover their valuable property. Or at least, that wasn't the way they saw it. The Wise One had explained that those boys had a divine responsibility to right the wrongs caused by their teacher's curiosity, and everyone had willingly sent them off on a noble quest to keep the evil warriors from destroying the world. Nobody else was fated to shoulder that burden. Except Ivan. And Mia. Nobody else from Vale, at least, for nobody else had sinned by setting foot on hallowed ground without permission. Now that Mt. Aleph had fallen, many were agreed that it seemed very much like a sign that those sinning children – their destined heroes – had failed, and thus the end of the world was nigh.

The Valeans were more of a cult than a clan. They were completely delusional. He'd known that they were strongly opposed to the release of Alchemy, and that they hadn't been fully educated on the matter, and that they would resent his plans, but Felix had always seemed saner than this... Felix had left here before the Wise One had appeared to the Valeans. That must have given him an advantage over the others. To think that they would blame him for the apocalypse when it had just been averted...

As the evening drew on and the sunlight started to fade, Alex noticed a young Mars Adept lighting the lanterns that had been set up around the camp. When he'd finished with the one outside a tent about forty feet away, he looked around for the next one, and his gaze settled on Alex's tree. For a few seconds, the boy stood there, looking terrified. Eventually, he turned and hurried away, apparently deciding to skip that one. Alex couldn't blame him. Chalk up one more case of bad parenting in this neighborhood...

A short while later, a sizable group left the tavern, taking their drinks and their conversation outside. They headed fairly purposefully in Alex's direction, though their progress was slow; no doubt they were far from sober. Alex seriously hoped they would say whatever they wanted to say and move on. He could imagine another best case scenario - that their impaired judgment would somehow lead them to heal him and let him down, that they might find it amusing to let him escape - but he had to admit that it didn't seem incredibly likely.

"Aww, he looks so sad..." One of the women giggled, sounding rather pleased about that.

"Damn right he does," one of the men replied, before turning to deliver a somewhat slurred speech to his captive audience. "You will never fuck with us. Got that? Never, nevr... Cause we've... yeah."

"Yeah!"

"And always. All we have left. Motherfucking cunt like you oughta just..."

"He's, like, all blue, like a bloody little vermin, like you could just cook it, you know?"

"No way you'd want to eat that."

"Doesn't he look so sad...?"

"I dunno. Think I can cheer him up?" One of the younger women asked, shoving the guy next to her and laughing as if this were a hilarious question.

"Uh, no."

"Go on!"

"Yeah...?" She grinned and grabbed Alex by the hair, then leaned down and kissed him on the mouth. Spurred on by the group's raucous response, she grabbed him further down. He'd been hoping that nobody would be so crass in public...

"Hey!" One of the men pulled her away. "If you ever fucking touch another man again - "

"Ugh, blood." She stuck out her tongue, then turned and smiled at her man when he shook her arm again. "Ooh, I made you mad?"

The guy growled, making her laugh, then grabbed a glass from one of the others.

"What the fuck, bastard, get your own pint!"

Ignoring his friend, the bastard in question upended the remains of the drink over Alex, prompting more jeering from the others. When Alex had blinked enough to clear his vision, he looked up to see the Vaean grinning, his arm still raised. He brought the glass down hard, smashing it across Alex's face and lacerating his own hand in the process.

"Shit! Oh, shit, that's..." The man staggered back, staring dumbstruck at the shards of glass sticking out of his palm.

"Oh, honey, you've gotta be more careful..."

"Right. Yeah." The guy kept staring at his hand, eventually joining in with the drunken laughter that seemed to be the crowd's overall reaction. "Shit, that's weird..."

Alex was hazily aware of the conversation around him. And it had dawned on him that he was losing even more blood. And he knew from experience that glass injuries were a devil to heal even with Psynergy, tweezers and salves on hand. And he could only assume he was going to die here, so in a way it hardly mattered what happened to his body now... So he found it mildly strange that the main thing on his mind, drawing more of his attention than any of the above, was how uniquely wasteful it was for the Valeans to destroy their own glassware when they had just lost their entire village.

When the crowd shifted, Alex was able to see the man who'd glassed him wandering off with a few others. They were probably going to the sanctum, but it was possible that they were too wasted to head straight there. Alex hoped so, anyway. He liked the idea that he might leave at least one of these people with scars.

His respite in spite was short lived; those who remained continued insulting him and baiting each other to toy with him. Alex closed his eyes and tried to tune it out, too weary to care as much as they might have expected. Though he noticed people burning him, pulling the glass out of his face, shouting and spitting, he barely did any more than take note. He had started to lose track of how long it had lasted when one of the men pulled his hips back and started grinding against him. Sick with a rush of dread, Alex tried to

tell himself that they wouldn't want to go any further. He was in such a wretched state, he must look disgusting. Nobody would want to go any further than this.

The Valean did soon step back, but then he dared one of the others to have a go. After a few laughing refusals, he agreed, and opted to outdo his friend. He was barely hard, but he managed to penetrate, prompting a mixed reaction from the onlookers – and Alex could have screamed, facing renewed proof that he couldn't keep this from happening again and again, but he wasn't going to give up any shred of self-control when that was the only kind of control he had left.

A wagon pulled into the open area at the center of the camp, its near side cast in shadow by the sunset. As it came to a halt, several people went to greet its riders, muttering that they'd cut it fine, returning from Vault so close to nightfall. The others chose to stay and watch the performance to the end; their friend was struggling to come, sweating profusely and gripping Alex's hips hard enough to tear at the fresh burns on one side, blood oozing over his fingers and into his clothes.

The newcomers were led over; Alex heard them drawing near and exclaiming various obscenities at the sight of him. One of the voices sounded oddly familiar. Blinking blood out of his eyes, Alex caught a red-tinted glimpse of them, and recognized one of the faces.

Old Lena's grandson, Don, used to visit Imil every so often to see her. Alex hadn't known him particularly well, but as far as he could remember, they'd always been on speaking terms. The last he'd heard, Don had still been living in Bilibin, though that had been years ago. When had he moved to Vale? There could be few worse circumstances in which to run into an old acquaintance, but Alex was seized

more by desperate hope than anything else. Surely he would help him, he would tell them all to stop because he didn't deserve this, whatever he had done, he still didn't deserve this, please, *please* let him say it now...

"Oh, man, it's really him. Fuck, this is sick..."

"Give it up, bitch." Someone else pulled their friend off of Alex; it didn't sound like there was much of a scuffle.

"You knew him?"

"Well, yeah, not really, but... damn, it was really him..."

"Have a stab at him yourself. Bound to do better than that cunt."

"I... What? No way, that's sick! When did he...?"

"Cause he's an old friend, huh?" Someone shoved him towards Alex, the open anger in his voice a clear sign even to the most intoxicated of onlookers that things could well be turning nasty. "Old ties, huh? I thought your loyalty lay with us."

"Of course! That's not even..."

"Prove it. Show us you're better than that cunt."

"Go on, get it up!"

"Better...?" Don reached out and traced the line of the gag across Alex's face, then hooked his fingers beneath the fabric and tugged slightly, as if to confirm that the sight before him was real. Alex tried to hold his gaze, willing him to keep in mind who they both were and how unthinkable this would be if they were still among friends. Mutual

friends. When his hand moved to cover Alex's eyes, he refused to let his hopes sink, if only because he couldn't bear to go without them.

Don circled round Alex and ran his fingers over the hair plastered to his back, then started pulling it free and rubbing away the caked blood. Once he finally had it all smoothed out, he wrapped an arm around his waist to take his weight, then leaned over and pulled his hair through the pillory, letting it hang freely around his face. Stepping back, he laid a hand between Alex's bare shoulders, pressing his palm against the partially-healed skin. Alex waited, listening to the heavy breathing behind him and wondering when exactly his old acquaintance had gotten so terrifying.

"Yeah... This is so sick..." Though he still sounded disbelieving, he no longer seemed to truly object to the situation. He slid his hand down Alex's back, running his thumb along the notches in his spine. Pulling Alex close again as he dealt with his belt, he left no room for doubt as to whether he was really getting off on all of this.

Alex found himself wishing Don had been as hostile as the others from the outset. It was unthinkable that he could have been talked into this so easily despite the lack of enmity between them. He wasn't acting as though he'd felt threatened into this. He wasn't doing it reluctantly, or out of blinding hatred, or as a means to an end, or for any other reason that Alex could have considered remotely explicable. To think that anyone he had known during the most mundane period of his life had only ever been a step or two away from torturing him under the wrong circumstances... If he could talk to him face to face, he felt sure he could still talk him out of this; he could insist that they see each other as human, second by second, as they always had done

before. As things stood, Alex could only wish he might die before this went another moment further.

Only the fires generated by the Mars Adepts lit the area by the time Don finished with him, grasping the pillory for support. He stayed with Alex for a minute or so as he caught his breath, and reached over to stroke his hair again. After winding a few strands around his fingers, he hesitated, then yanked them out. One of his neighbors said something that Alex couldn't hear, but his reply was clear enough.

"Yeah. Just a memento."

This seemed to get a laugh, for some reason. Alex wondered whether anyone else was going to follow his example, but when the blur of the crowd shifted, nobody else messed around with anything above the belt. It dawned on Alex that there was no point hoping it was over whenever one of them finished with him. He didn't understand why they wouldn't just kill him. They could fuck a corpse, couldn't they? Was it really all that much more fun to keep it alive? Trying to find a hope to hold on to, he told himself that the longer this went on, the more likely it was that they'd end up killing him soon, whether they meant to or not.

It was several hours into the night when the last of the crowd dispersed, the departure of the fire Adepts leaving the area in near-total darkness. By then, Alex had lost any sense of certainty that he was still alive, that he hadn't already slipped into hell without noticing.

It was a few hours longer before much coherence returned to his thoughts. He still couldn't tear his mind away from everything that had happened. He wished his body would stop healing itself; his strength returned to him slowly enough that it was only keeping him in limbo. Would he be

able to recover any agency by the time the night was over? It was still early enough in the spring that there was an edge to the night air, even this far south. As the hours dragged by, he was surprised at how badly the cold and the boredom could eat at his mind when he was in so much pain to begin with.

Alex tried to provide himself with diversions from his recent memories. If he could take any of the Valeans down with him, which three would he choose? The question was too hopelessly hypothetical to serve as a distraction. There were far too many candidates. He couldn't make that sort of distinction between them. If he'd had any idea what Don was capable of, he'd have killed him years ago, while he had the chance. But everyone else...

He wondered whether Don had gone along with the others out of a fetish for those in the Mercury Clan. It wasn't much of an explanation, but it was better than nothing. The people of Imil placed those in the Clan on a pedestal; their powers and duties gave them status in the area. Alex had noticed that his uncommon appearance drew attention to him even beyond Imil. It had been his favorite aspect of his heritage – after his Psynergy, of course. He'd never understood those who lived by that old saying, to aim at being loved without being admired. He could see one advantage to it now; their lives must hold an extra degree of safety. On the other hand, he knew one member of the Mercury Clan who had loved her people all her life without seeking high praise in return, and if this fetish theory held any water, then Don might have raped Mia just as readily, given the chance. Alex hadn't thought he could feel any more sickened by this whole affair, but that image proved him wrong.

By now, there was no denying that the elders of Vale had decided to simply leave him to die. Alex was certain that

someone would have tried to question him if he'd been in better health when they had taken him prisoner. Most likely, these people had been too squeamish to want to hear him talk about what had happened by the time he'd made it here. Nevermind that he wouldn't have wanted to bring it into the conversation anyway... Maybe the Wise One had warned them not to talk to him. Maybe the elders had ordered it, for some reason of their own. If they never had to hear his side of the story, they would have less trouble rationalising theirs. If he was lucky, some of his attackers might sober up enough to feel ashamed of themselves and attempt to make amends in the morning, though that might only mean listening to him and granting him a merciful death. Alex couldn't help but suspect that even those who regretted their actions would be no help; it wasn't hard to imagine them going out of their way to avoid him, feeling too much guilt and resentment to want to listen to anything he might have to say about their behaviour.

The silence of the night was shattered by the sound of wailing and yelling from somewhere nearby. Alex heard someone storming over, but he still had no idea what was going on when a man reached his tree and started glimmering with Venus Psynergy, wrenching the pillory free and throwing him to the ground. The Valean started laying into him as if possessed; Alex couldn't make out what he was shouting or shield himself from the blows, and he wanted to protest that there was still glass under his skin, but he didn't think he would care even if he knew. It became a struggle even to breathe when he started kicking him in the chest; he felt his bones snap and could have retched at the damp sounds as the Valean went on regardless, until a handful more villagers appeared and pulled him away.

Alex stared up at the spectacle of a couple of women and another man trying to hold his attacker back without hurting

him, the group of them yelling enough at each other that it all started to add up: *"Get it together!"* and *"It won't bring her back!"* and *"Stop it, just stop it!"* When one of the women yanked at his hair, he turned and collapsed into her, shaking against her, and one of the group left to deal with Alex, pulling him to his knees with the pillory and fixing it to the tree again, leaving more of his weight on the ground than on his neck this time. As the group left, a couple of them looked back; Alex heard one of them speak, and he was sure he heard disapproval and pity in her tone. *"I do hope they execute him soon."*

They? Who did she mean, *they*? If she wasn't happy about the situation, why didn't she do something about it herself? Alex had seen the diffusion of responsibility that occurred in large groups too often to believe that there was much else at work here. It was unfortunate that the only people who felt entitled to do whatever they pleased with him were the ones who meant him harm. Every breath was agonising, but there was a silver lining to this encounter: he was slightly less accessible in this position. Plus, it sounded as though someone close to those people had just died, and it was nice to know he wasn't the only one suffering. Though they were probably getting exactly the same sort of satisfaction from his misfortune... It wasn't as though he was a completely blameless scapegoat, but this was ridiculous. If they'd treated him better when the Wise One had handed him over, he could have helped them out. He'd offered his services as a healer in other towns in order to fund his travels, and there was no reason he couldn't have done the same here; his skills weren't limited to his Psynergy.

Then Alex remembered that he had never intended to walk among the Valeans as an equal, and his mind scrambled to retcon his indignation with his intentions. It was... not as if he would have kept his people in ill health... Though he

found his mind flinched in revulsion and something like terror at the thought of ever calling the Valeans 'his people', now that they had expressed their opinion on the matter so vehemently. Village full of psychopaths and cowards... Burn it to the ground, that was all he could do if he ever had the chance, burn it to the ground, salt the earth, kill anyone who ever set foot here again, mount their heads around the perimeter on spears tipped with fragments of the Wise One's shattered body...

Alex had expected to have recovered to some degree during the rest of the night, but the morning found him feverish, chilled to the bone and burning up, his thoughts thickening like broth and blurring into one another. He felt the sunrise on his skin, saw it through his eyelids, but it felt almost blasphemous and he didn't dare watch.

The first stirrings of life elsewhere in the camp didn't reach him though the fog around his mind. He hadn't moved a muscle for hours when he felt a sharp pain below one eye; he opened them both and was greeted with the sight of a couple of boys jumping back, one of them dropping a stick and the other screeching *"Shit, it's still alive!"*

The boys fled. Alex envied them that ability.

As the day started up in earnest around him, the gossip soon fleshed out the story behind the midnight attack. A child had died in the night. Her father had left the sanctum first. The rest of the family had followed. Though Alex felt a deepened sort of misery, he couldn't be bothered to interrogate it for the cause. The ground was spinning, he was sure of it. His mouth already tasted of bile, among other things. A little more nausea didn't change anything, for better or for worse. Not even a family...

People were carrying things around. Materials. Crates. Metal and wood. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in one surface, broken bones jutting out of his skin, and he hadn't heard anything at the time but in retrospect he wondered whether he'd heard the air singing or whether he'd been trying to say something. He never noticed himself passing out, but he wasn't always sure whether the burning came from within or without.

At times, he thought he was using Alchemy; the ground burst open, the planet's blood boiling through the cracks, enemies burning away, their screams scouring the air raw, gouging it away until he could have torn the atmosphere away with his fingers, the only one in the world to see what lay beyond... It was unbearable to return to the haze of reality, he could have screamed, he might have been screaming, but it never lasted long. He wanted to dream of snow. He'd been feverish before. She'd been so kind...

The mortal sun was well into its descent through the sky when the settlement around Alex faded into something far more real. The Wise One was before him, and he could pay no heed to anything else. The Wise One was before him, and he knew it was real. Terror rushed through his veins as he felt its presence touch his mind, and he knew he had to beg; the Wise One should never have to ask, let alone ask twice.

Please, have mercy... I'm yours, all yours, I'm sorry, Wise One, please, have mercy!

The Wise One stared down at him. He couldn't read its gaze. Frantic that he was still displeasing it, he was about to go on when it disappeared. The rest of the world faded back into view, bleached of all meaning. The Wise One had left him. What had he done wrong? It hadn't answered him, it had left him here again. Would it ever give him another chance...?

Someone unseen was throwing cherry stones at him when a couple of red haired young men approached and shooed them away. One of the men was carrying an oil canister. Alex didn't really understand why the two Mars Adepts started pouring oil over him, but a nearby young woman seemed to take offense.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"What do you think? The Wise One told us to finish him off."

The Wise One had answered his prayer after all. It hadn't abandoned him here. It wasn't going to punish him forever.

"Not like that, you're not! Do you have any idea how much my dad paid for that stuff?"

"But the Wise One told us - "

"Just chop his head off! There's an axe with the firewood, right by the tavern."

"Oh, come on! That's no fun. Don't you wanna see him burn?"

"You won't carry out the Wise One's orders unless it's fun? Fucking wankers! You'll use the axe or I'll use it on you, got that?"

"Alright, go get it!"

As soon as she left, they started splashing oil over him again.

"Hurry up..."

"You bastards! I knew it! I told you my father - "

"Look, we'll pay you back, alright? Don't wave that thing around..."

"You'd better! You know how much you've wasted already? Know how much that'll cost you?"

While the Valeans argued above him, Alex tried to figure out whether he'd rather be burned or beheaded. Both options inspired a certain amount of dread. He would rather die than spend another second here, but he still felt a sick fury at the thought that everything would be taken from him soon, whether he liked it or not. If Mia had wanted to speak to him again, if he had wanted to look upon the sea in winter, if he'd wanted anything more than a memory of the taste of water or the smell of antiseptic for another few seconds, it was too late. Too late even to choose how much longer those memories would exist, how long he had to decide their value; it was a heavy sorrow, the feeling that he had to weigh his own life in the balance, because if he didn't grieve for his own experience in this world, if he didn't mourn himself, then he couldn't be sure that anyone else would. He wasn't sure why he felt that it was worth spending his last moments grieving when soon enough, he wouldn't exist to remember that he had. It felt important anyway. If it was enough to lend his death any dignity, however fleeting...

The Valeans started pointing at the sky. They left without carrying out the Wise One's orders.

Alex couldn't understand. He'd been ready. To pull even that from beneath his feet...

The sunset came and went. Nobody came to fulfill the Wise One's orders.

Alex sensed the approach of a powerful group of Adepts, and looked up automatically. Kyle and Isaac came into view,

walking across the centre of the camp with a blond woman who had to be Dora. Gareth followed after, talking to the mayor and a few others who looked like relatives. When Gareth looked around and stopped dead in his tracks, his family tried to keep walking as the rest of the group caught up. Gareth wouldn't move. Isaac followed his gaze, spent a couple of seconds looking terribly blank, then set off back the way they'd come. Isaac's parents seemed torn between staying and going after their son, but they soon opted for the latter.

Felix stared as if he couldn't even begin to believe his eyes. Jenna blushed furiously, and when Mia knelt to throw up, Jenna looked around frantically before moving to hold Mia's hair back from her face. Sheba started giggling, her eyes wide and terrified, and Ivan tried to pull her away from the others.

To what would have been Alex's surprise if he'd had the presence of mind to give it any thought, Piers was the first one to cross the grass towards him. The Lemurian started glowing with Psynergy and arguing with the nearest villagers.

"You cannot keep someone this way! It's barbaric..."

Alex felt sleep Psynergy pressing in on his mind, and he offered it no resistance. It felt like mercy.

2. Sanctuary

Alex woke to a feeling of numb warmth. He could have been floating in cotton wool, from the strangeness of it. Neither his mind nor his body had the energy to move on from that feeling.

A small noise to his left caught his attention. He turned his head in time to see a blur of something small and blue leaving the room. He was on Saturos and Menardi's ship... No, Piers had one of a similar build. Piers had brought him here.

Alex remembered falling asleep. He hadn't expected to wake up again. His mind slid away from that thought. He was in bed, but not in pain. It was warm here. He didn't know what to expect, and he couldn't bring himself to speculate. Everything felt distant and numb.

Piers came through the door with a Mercury djinni perched on his shoulder. He met Alex's gaze, then moved to sit down by the bed. Alex stared past his chest as he cast Ply. He had left the door open.

Alex felt he ought to say something. "...Good morning."

Piers shifted his chair back and gave him a long look.

"Good morning." Piers seemed to be having a hard time keeping his voice steady. "I didn't expect to see you awake so soon. We brought you back to the ship last night. The others helped heal you, but most of them are out at the moment. You've been responding amazingly well to Ply. How are you feeling?"

Alex stared at him, unable to really process the fact that he was here. A good-natured healer had shown up eventually. There was a smudge of blood above Piers' eyes, as if he'd touched his face before he'd washed his hands. Alex knew he'd been healing already, through the power of the golden sun. Piers and the others had chosen to boost his recovery with healing Psynergy, instead of hindering it with further injury. Such a difference...

"Are you still in any pain?" Piers asked, speaking slower this time. "We have a few more vials left. Tell me if you think you need one."

The question was relevant. Was he still hurt? Piers was speaking to him, not over him. Alex shook his head, and the movement was tiring, but it didn't hurt, so it was definitely the right answer.

Piers sighed and leaned back. "That's... ah, that's good. Would you like something to eat?"

Alex closed his eyes. He didn't even want to be awake. It was too unreal...

Piers seemed to realize that he didn't have the energy. Alex heard him get up, and his eyes drifted open to watch him leave.

When he reached the door, Piers turned back and met his gaze. He looked troubled. Small wonder.

"Alex..." Piers sighed again, and came to sit back down by the bed. "I ought to tell you. The situation, how things really are... I'm sorry, I know you must be tired. We thought we'd have more time. If I didn't warn you now..."

When we found you, the Valeans initially refused to hand you over. The Wise One has ordered them to execute you, and its word is divine law to these people. My teammates were not willing to fight their family and friends in order to get you out of there. Some of them thought that it might not be such a bad idea to put you out of your misery immediately, rather than allowing you to recover to the point where you might seek disproportionate revenge.

In the end, we convinced the mayor to delay your execution. We insisted that you at least be given a chance to tell us your side of the story. The Wise One told us at Mars Lighthouse that you had returned to Mt Aleph to claim the golden sun. You've told us that you feel no attachment to your allies, and your actions seem to back this up. None of us know the true extent of the golden sun's power, but you've been recovering at an amazing rate. Felix is worried that you may react violently when you recover your strength, and that you might be more than a match for us when that time comes.

When the others see that you are capable of talking to them today, they might not wait much longer than this evening to reach a decision. If you do not give Felix a reason to trust you the next time you see him, even after everything that has happened..."

Alex stared up at Piers, getting the gist of the warning even though he couldn't keep up with all the details. It wasn't over. A delayed execution... Alex couldn't even come close to believing that Mia would ever hand him back to the people who had tortured him. Didn't she and Piers have any say in things? How could Piers look him in the eye and ask the impossible of him when he had barely woken up?

Piers started casting Ply again. The refreshing Psynergy eased Alex's exhaustion, and the gesture seemed completely at odds with the warning.

"They're good people," Piers told him, "but they can be incredibly impatient, by Lemurian standards."

Since Alex knew nothing of Lemurian standards, this didn't make things much clearer.

Alex closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the quality of light had changed. The air smelt slightly less of smoke and more of food. He couldn't remember falling back asleep, but he must have done. He'd been tired enough. Was there a chance that Piers had cast sleep Psynergy on him again...?

"Alex?" A light, chirping voice asked.

Alex looked to his left and saw a Mars djinni sitting on a bedside table beside a bowl of oatmeal gruel.

"Piers told me to reheat this for you, when you're ready."

Alex managed to sit up, leaning against the headboard for support. After giving himself a minute to catch his breath, he gave the creature a reply. "Go ahead."

"Where are we going?" The djinni asked.

The question stumped Alex until he realized that this djinni might not have a perfect grasp of the way humans used the common language. Had Felix ever asked the djinn to scout ahead of the group during their travels?

"We're not going anywhere. Reheat the food."

The djinni chirped its agreement and started glowing with Psynergy.

Alex closed his eyes, trying to get his mind in gear. Now that he could move and speak, he had options. If Felix handed him over for execution, he would face a relatively swift and painless death. He probably would have died yesterday, if Felix's return hadn't diverted the villagers' attention; they had been pointing at the sky, and Alex had seen the wings attached to Piers' ship in Atteka before he'd left for Angara.

How had it ended up this way? Alex had never let himself get too attached to his allies, and he'd rather enjoyed annoying them by telling them so, but he'd always thought Jenna and Sheba had enjoyed returning fire, and he'd never tried to provoke pure hatred from Felix... When he had told them that they meant nothing to him, their reactions had convinced him that they still did not consider him disposable. He'd striven for emotional detachment, but it occurred to him now that he had never truly reached this goal except in cases where it had been mutual. However little he had felt for his allies, he had still been relying on their emotions to shape the relationship between them. There hadn't always been any advantage to teasing them; he'd been too lax around them, baiting them just to see their expressions. If they'd been the only ones getting attached, then the thought of those who had known him condoning and watching his execution would not feel so much more terrible than the prospect of dying in the pillory among strangers. He could have met Mia and her friends with more dignity as a fresh grave, as a memory tempered by nostalgia...

"It's ready!"

Alex began to wonder whether the djinni could even recognize human emotions; despite speaking fairly fluently, it still hadn't modulated its tone to reflect the mood. Pulling a thin smile into place, Alex tried testing the limits of its comprehension. "You're a tactless little cunt, aren't you?"

"What's a cunt?"

"Go ask Kraden." Alex hated fielding that sort of question, though he supposed he'd brought that one on himself. The djinni flew out of the room in a blur.

What were his options? If he took his own life, he wouldn't have to worry about Felix's decision. If he attempted it here, he might not get very far before they found him. Even if he succeeded, his death would then serve to satisfy those who despised him, and to confront those who had come to his aid with the futility of their intervention.

If he were to walk out of here on good terms with his allies, then he could find somewhere isolated to end things, somewhere in the mountains or along the coast, and nobody would ever be entirely sure what had become of him. Of course, if he were to leave here a free man, it would be his decision whether he lived or died in the first place...

Either way, if he wanted to get out of here, then he would have to tell Felix and the others whatever they wanted to hear. His priority in the conversation ahead would be to placate them in order to leave this place as soon as possible. He needn't aim any higher; he didn't truly need them to understand his side of the story, or grant him any further favours.

Now that he had a goal in mind, he could fit his word and deed to his purpose, when the time came. There were still some obvious downsides to this plan compared to

immediate suicide, but he was probably relatively safe here for the moment. Besides, once he left this ship, he might never see these people again. He found he wasn't entirely willing to deprive himself of the chance to see what had become of them, while he was here.

Alex turned his attention to the food - evidence that at least one person around here was willing to let him recover his strength. The bowl was heavy, but its contents tasted perfect. Once he'd finished, he set the bowl down on his lap, feeling slightly more human. Stretching out his arm, he took a tentative look at the damage. The burns and scars along its length looked almost fully healed; no wonder the others had been alarmed by the rate of his recovery. He looked gaunt; no great surprise, given that he'd endured the last few days on an empty stomach. He was in a sleeveless nightshirt, but someone had left some clothes on a chair by the foot of the bed. He didn't have enough energy to get up and get dressed, but it was good to know that he was free to do so as soon as he pleased.

He was thirsty.

When he focused, he could feel the glow of Alchemy within his body and mind; he'd recovered slightly more than the spark that had kept him alive these last few days, but he was still miles away from full power. The last time he'd tried to summon water, he'd overdone it, to say the least. The same result would not be possible this time. He did not have nearly as much power available at the present moment. Staring at the empty bowl, he drew on his Psynergy and felt it gradually respond to his will. The bowl filled with water. The room did not flood.

The water tasted fine. His head hurt, but he'd expected that. It didn't feel as though he'd used up much Psynergy, but he

would probably do well to let himself recover further before he practiced again.

If he was given time, he could hone his powers.

He possessed part of the golden sun. He might eventually be able to challenge Isaac for the rest.

Could he still follow through with his plans? He had always believed that he had a responsibility to protect this world. He'd meant to go further than the duties of the Mercury Clan, to personally ensure that the planet survived for all eternity as the home of the human race, and that every future generation would be fortunate enough to experience and uphold a true golden age of civilization. Did he have any right to back out of his life's work merely because he wasn't happy anymore? If there had been any substance to his beliefs, then his life was not his own to throw away so easily.

He'd thought of his plans as the pinnacle of altruism and hedonism. Now that things had taken this turn, he actually had to draw a distinction between those two motivations. The altruistic course of action would be to lick his wounds and proceed with caution. Right now, bearing in mind what humans were capable of, he found he felt more inclined to die and let them all rot in hell. To what extent did that sentiment stem from fear of the future...?

Alex groaned and slumped forward, resting his head in his hands. There were too many questions he needed to ask himself before he could be sure of anything. He splashed his face with the remaining water, then set the bowl back on the table, trying to calm his breathing. It would do no good to come up with hasty answers based on the way he wanted to feel. He would have to be honest with himself if he wanted

to see clearly for the rest of his life. If he was to serve as the foundation for all of civilization, then it was vital that he see clearly in order to pinpoint and repair every crack. To maintain his resolve forever.

When he'd first started planning for immortality, he'd anticipated the dangers of grief and ennui. It would be unforgivably dangerous to allow those emotions to persist; he would never be able to escape the fate he had chosen without abandoning humans to fend for themselves, leading to the inevitable spread of war, and ultimately, the end of all life on Weyard. He'd been prepared to avoid getting too attached to any particular individual or generation, and to fully enjoy the sort of pleasures that would always be available. Though now that he thought about the rewards he'd anticipated, he remembered counting a harem among them.

The idea had seemed straightforward enough until now; sex was fun, and those members of his household who practiced it as their livelihood would be the lucky ones. No matter that they would not all have chosen that life for themselves... How could he have guessed how awful it felt to endure any unwanted touch, no matter how painless? Even if the body responded, the mind suffered. Surely he would have been able to tell if he'd started to make anyone feel that way. He would never have become as callous as the Wise One. He wasn't that cruel. After all, no matter how many people he'd killed, he had never lingered over a single death. Why would he want to pay unnecessary attention to the grim reality of the situation? To the consequences of... of necessary action... that sort of terror... He was *not* what the Wise One thought he was!

Trying not to scream - for too many reasons - he rolled over and buried his face in the pillow, trying to let the knot of

frustration and memory within him loosen its grip as he focused on the quiet darkness. He had to go easy on himself. He had to recover.

Throughout his empire, all acts of rape and torture would be punishable by death. He would obey the same laws as everyone else, in that respect. The Valeans would die. They were all complicit...

It occurred to Alex that there was technically one way he could fail at his plans - or opt out of them - and still leave the world protected by the wielder of the complete golden sun. If he could theoretically take Isaac's half, then Isaac could likewise take his. This didn't strike Alex as a remotely good idea. If the Wise One had put its faith in Isaac, then he was bound to be a terrible person, as his actions so far had indicated. That option couldn't very well be plan B so much as plan Z.

In any case, he couldn't deal with Isaac quite yet. Or any opposition, to be honest. If Felix's group had brought him back to the ship last night, then they might not have moved far from Vale. Perhaps he ought to ask them to fly him further from the Wise One's territory before they parted ways.

Could he prove the Wise One wrong if he proceeded with his plans - the very plans it had read from his mind? If its opinion of him remained unchanged, would it come after him again? As the guardian of Vale and the elemental stars, it might not be able to leave its lands. He couldn't assume that was the case, though he certainly hoped so. No matter how far he travelled, he would stay on the move until he possessed the power to destroy that monster and save the world -

Wait, hadn't Piers said... *"The Wise One told us at Mars Lighthouse that you had returned to Mt Aleph to claim the golden sun."*

The Wise One had been at Mars Lighthouse while he'd been at Mt Aleph. The day the others had lit the final Lighthouse... They'd have been on their way back to Vale the next day...

The Wise One could teleport across continents at will.

There was no escape. It was everywhere. It knew everything. It would never let him recover enough strength to defy its will. The fight at Mt Aleph had been his only chance, and he had blown it.

The pillow was hot against his eyes. The Wise One materialized nearby. Its power swamped the tiny room. It didn't feel real. It felt inevitable. Alex drew in another shaky breath. So little space between them...

Before the Wise One could begin, Alex tried to warp away, desperate to be elsewhere; he drew on his Psynergy for about a tenth of a second before a jagged wave of agony tore his mind away from all else.

Even after the sensation subsided, the rise and fall of his chest sent shocks of pain through his body. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and confirmed that he was crying blood. Eyes clenched shut, he laid quietly and waited for the Wise One to make its next move. It clearly didn't intend to let him leave. What was it going to do to him?

{{ Heed me, Alex. I have come to talk. }}

The pause seemed to indicate that an answer was required. "Ahh, mliissnghh..."

{{ I can read your mind. You do not need to speak aloud. }}

Alex focused as ordered: *Yes. I'm listening.*

{{ There is something I must ask of you. If you cooperate, I do not expect to have any further business with you. If you do not answer immediately, I will give you a few minutes to think it over, then ask again. If you refuse me, either directly or through continued silence, I will remove you from this place, and the light punishments that you have suffered so far will be as nothing compared to that which lies in store. You will not die until you reach the end of your natural lifespan. Every few years, I will give you another chance to answer. }}

Alex wondered what sort of death would count as 'natural' if the Wise One were to torture him indefinitely. If it gave him a heart attack within a month, would it intervene to keep him alive? Twenty-three was certainly not the limit of his natural lifespan. Would he have to be sixty or seventy before it would let its actions affect his health?

{{ You are not currently human. The golden sun has extended your maximum lifespan to twelve thousand years. }}

If he never gave in to the Wise One's demands, it would spend the next twelve thousand years raping him to death... Whatever it asked of him, he could hardly refuse.

{{ If you were to fully cooperate, it would be possible for me to extract your portion of the golden sun without killing you. This would not leave you sufficient elemental power to remain an Adept, but the loss of your Psynergy would be the only side effect. I am not permitted to kill you or any other human-born creature. I am nevertheless charged with

safeguarding the golden sun. Will you agree to part with its power? }}

What? No! Of all things, why did it have to ask that of him? It might as well order him to destroy Weyard now and be done with it. If he gave in, he doomed the world... But he couldn't hope to hold out for millenia. And he was dead either way. Would the Wise One take the golden sun for itself? If it had wanted that power, it could easily have beaten him to the peak of Mt Aleph. Perhaps it meant to transfer the rest to Isaac. It might have given that boy as much as possible already. Alex tried to find out, hoping the Wise One's answer would make this loss easier to bear. *What will you do with it?*

{{ That is no concern of yours. }}

Of course, he shouldn't have expected any help from that quarter... He should just say yes. He had to say yes. There was no escape. The Wise One would get the answer it wanted, sooner or later. The fate of the world was out of his hands. He had to say yes, but somehow he wasn't saying it. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did. Some part of his mind couldn't seem to grasp that it was already over, that living was no longer the point.

{{ Enough. I will ask again in ten minutes. Until then... }}

Alex forced his eyes open. The bastard couldn't have given him longer than thirty seconds there. What was it playing at?

The Wise One levitated the chair by the bed, then collapsed it into a cloud of dust. It threw something onto the pillow a few inches from Alex's face. He drew back and squinted at the object, a length of wood about a foot long. The Wise One had left one of the chair legs intact.

{{ Fuck yourself. }}

Alex froze, trying to get his head around the order he'd been given. He stared at the broken bit of furniture, then up at the Wise One. This was because he hadn't answered...?

Wait! Please, I will answer now, you can take it now!

The Wise One stared at him silently. Alex remembered what it planned to do if he disobeyed it outright. He reached out, his hand shaking in pain as his fingers closed around the chair leg. He wasn't up to this. But he couldn't keep the Wise One waiting. Ten minutes here, or a few years elsewhere. Hypothetically, it was an easy choice.

His fingers found the foot of the chair leg, where it had been worn smooth against the floor. He gradually maneuvered it between his legs, and all the while his mind filled with dread as he tried to figure out the easiest way of getting through this.

{{ Use the other end. }}

Alex stared at the splintered end, where it had been broken away from the rest of the chair. He took a deep breath, then turned it around and tentatively pressed it against his body. It prickled, and it was far too large. There was no way he'd be able to get it in. His fingers tried to work his body open, and he pressed in a corner a few times, hissing in pain without getting anywhere. Each attempt sapped his remaining strength. How could he beg the Wise One not to count this as a refusal to obey without admitting to them both that he couldn't obey? *I... please... I - I...*

The Wise One took control of his body for a few seconds, sorting out that problem for him. Alex let out a brief scream as his body returned to him, falling limp against the

mattress. The splintered end was a couple of inches in, by the feel of it.

Alex took a few more deep breaths, then turned onto his side and curled forward, reaching for his fourth leg. He knew from the last couple of days that he was in no danger of blacking out quite yet.

As time dragged on, the wood seemed to work its way deeper into him. The surface became slick with blood, and his grip kept slipping. His hands were going numb. He adjusted his grip for the thousandth time, and pushed too hard. The spike in sensation finally shattered his concentration, and he twisted his face into the mattress, choking down his gasps until his head stopped spinning. He told himself to move, but couldn't unclench his fists. Curling in on himself, he tried pleading again; wasn't this enough already?

Please, take it now, just take it! I've done everything you wanted, I'll give you what you want, please, isn't that enough...?

The Wise One maintained its silence. Alex steeled himself, then slowly started again. He wished he knew how much time he had left.

Almost five minutes later, the Wise One brought it to an end.

{{ That is enough. I trust you have had sufficient time to think. }}

Enough? Alex doubted he could bring himself to move again even if his death depended on it.

{{ I will now ask again. Will you give up the golden sun? }}

Yes! Yes! For fuck's sake, yes!

The Wise One's Psynergy intruded into his mind, and Alex mentally recoiled in revulsion.

{{ You have not surrendered. We will - }}

No! Take it now! TAKE IT NOW!

Alex wouldn't have imagined that he could interrupt the Wise One, but it seemed to have stopped to listen. He made a conscious effort to withdraw from his own Psynergy, turning away from all the warmth and light within him. For a few long seconds, he feared that it might be too late, that the Wise One might stick rigidly to its word once more. When its Psynergy entered him again, he didn't resist. His body grew colder. Everything became woozy.

Alex only hoped that Felix would show better judgment than to revive him again...

"Alex! I'm sorry! I tried to return, but the Wise One wouldn't let me in, so I went to fetch the others. And Kraden says a cunt is a - "

"That's enough, Reflux."

Alex opened his eyes in time to see a Mars djinni meld into Piers' hand. It wasn't a terribly strange sight; Felix had shown Alex what the djinn were capable of a few months ago in Alhafra. He'd appreciated the demonstration. It seemed a lifetime ago now.

Piers was standing by the bed. He hadn't replaced the chair. Felix and Jenna were standing by the far wall. Alex's body still ached, though the pain was no longer debilitating.

"Would you drink this? I've done what I can with Ply, but you're not responding very well to Psynergy anymore."

Piers offered him a vial of medicine.

"Nnngh..." Alex tried to refuse the offer, but it was still difficult to talk. He looked around, and realized it would be easier to just accept the vial. They would fuss otherwise. He didn't want to keep them here.

Jenna tried to help him sit up. It took longer that way. Felix waited until he'd finished the medicine before speaking.

"I'm sorry. This happened on our watch. You should have been safe here."

Alex took a few deep breaths. He had never relied much on items for healing in battle. They weren't as good as Psynergy, but they were still remarkably effective.

"Even... if you had been here... there was nothing you could have done. The Wise One would not have let you intervene. For all we know, it might have made you join in."

The others looked revolted by that idea. Alex was relieved. They were not likely to take advantage of his current state.

"But still..." Jenna bit her lip, then continued in a more useful manner. "They're all saying you've given up your powers. The Wise One said nobody's obliged to deal with you in any particular way anymore. The mayor still wants to kill you, but we wouldn't have gone along with that anyway. You can stay with us on the ship for a while, if you like. Or we can teleport you home, if you want to go back to Imil. Or anywhere else. Just ask."

Alex closed his eyes and tried to draw on his Psynergy. There was nothing there. He'd known it, but he couldn't fathom it. He tried again. There was still nothing there.

"Shall we let you rest?" Piers asked.

"...Yes."

"We'll be upstairs. Nobody will pass through here without our knowledge. Ask Fog to fetch us if you need anything. Dinner's in a few hours. I'll check on you again before then."

A Mercury djinni perched on the bedside table as the Adepts left. Alex ignored it, and waited for the sound of footsteps to die down before hauling himself out of bed. His body ached, but it obeyed him.

The room was practically empty besides the table and the bed. The clean clothes that had been on the chair were now beneath the djinni on the table. There was a cupboard built into one wall, and it was locked. Alex turned to the djinni and smiled.

"Would you mind opening this for me, Fog?"

"I'll have a go." The djinni blurred through the door. There were clicking sounds from inside. "Try it now."

Alex opened the door, and stood back as Fog darted out. The broom cupboard was full of cleaning supplies and other clutter. There was no rope, but there were several sharp objects. Alex fished out a chore knife and a leather bag. There was a full-length mirror at the back; he shifted a couple of boxes to get to it, then hung it back on the wall.

Alex took off his new nightshirt and inspected the healers' work. His scars were faint, but extensive. He traced the dark

circles under his eyes, then ran a hand through his hair. It had been cut short in a very uneven way, and it was still blue. What colour had he expected it to be? Brown? Black? Grey? Something mundane. Only Mercury Adepts had blue hair. Maybe it would grow out a different colour. He wouldn't stick around long enough to find out.

An angular scar along his back caught his eye. It was a bit faint, but it looked like writing. He craned his neck to read the reflection.

M... A... R... C... U... S...

He'd been graffitied.

The djinni chirped as he nudged it off his new clothes. The leggings were a reasonable fit, but the tunic was slightly baggy. They hadn't given him any shoes, but they probably meant to sort that out later.

"I'm going to have a look around," Alex informed Fog. "You may accompany me if you wish."

"Of course I will! Piers told me to keep an eye on you."

Piers clearly hadn't added anything about ignoring the invalid's orders. Alex made it to the door, then turned back and smiled. "Would you mind opening this for me...?"

Only eight of the other bedrooms along the corridor showed signs of use. The two rooms that Kyle, Jason and Claudia had occupied on the way back from Prox still contained some of their possessions. Felix and Piers seemed to be sharing a room, though the other boys had taken one each. The girls were sharing a room as well, though they seemed to have claimed separate beds. When Alex found Kraden's room, he

spent the better part of an hour reading the recent entries in the sage's journal.

The lower decks were composed of a veritable maze of cluttered store rooms. Alex found the Tomegathericon in one, and spent a while flicking through its descriptions of bizarre monsters and obscure summoning spells. He wouldn't be able to use any of them without Psynergy, but it was still interesting. He took it with him when he moved on.

In one of the dustier rooms, he found a pile of old tins of paint. He levered one of them open with his knife. The blue paint inside hadn't yet dried out.

Alex opened a few more of the tins. The stink of solvent was overpowering. He flicked through the Tomegathericon until he found the chapter on summoning circles. Their intricate designs allowed control to be exerted over the summoning and banishment of demons and other arcane creatures.

After shifting some furniture out of the way, Alex dipped his hand into the black paint and smeared a wide, dripping circle onto the wall. He switched to red paint for the sigils along the rim.

The Wise One had asked him how many people he had killed. He couldn't afford to paint the town red. This would have to do. After all, one should make at least a token effort at banishing one's demons...

Felix and the others looked up as Fog flew into the common room.

"Uh, guys? Alex collapsed, and I thought I should tell you."

"What happened this time?" Felix asked, swiftly leading the group below deck. "Did the Wise One return...?"

"No, he was just wandering around the ship. Must have gotten tired. It's this way..."

"You let him out on his own?"

"Is that all right? He wasn't sleeping."

"Ugh, it stinks down here. Whorl, Waft, could you do something to freshen up the air?" Jenna asked, calling out a couple of Jupiter djinn. They nodded and darted off into the distance.

"I don't smell anything."

"Fog, you have no nose."

That was one sentence Piers had never expected to say. He'd found himself saying an awful lot of those lately.

The Adepts burned down a section of wall when they found that the door had been blocked off from inside. The far wall was covered with mystical symbols. Alex was lying on the floor in a mess of spilt black and red paint. They moved him into the corridor while the djinn set about tidying up. Piers focused on casting Ply while Jenna cleaned the paint from Alex's hands and face. Felix helped for a few minutes, then went to find him another change of clothes.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Fog asked, staring at the painted wall. "I was going to ask him to do the Sixty-Eighth Chaldean Seal next."

"Fog, you have no taste. Remind me never to leave you in charge of anyone ever again."

Alex groaned as he woke up. His head hurt. Something always ached...

He sat up and accepted a vial from Piers. His clothes felt slimy. There was a metal tub full of water in the center of the room, near a folded pile of towels and clothes.

"Dinner will be ready soon. Why don't you come upstairs and eat with us once you've gotten washed?"

"I will. Thank you." Alex's gaze settled first on Piers, then on the door. "Now, if you'd be so kind as to leave...?"

"I'll be right outside."

Alex could have done without that assurance.

Dinner was awkward.

Alex arrived in time to help Felix lay the table while Piers started serving the stew. According to Jenna, the others were all out at the Valean camp.

Isaac and Ivan arrived shortly after the group had started eating. Felix ushered them outside for a quick word. When they came back in, they joined the meal silently. Alex focused on his food. The newcomers had looked quite shocked to see him at the table. Jenna may have claimed that they would never have had him killed, but Alex was certain that Piers' earlier warning had been closer to the truth.

Nobody's appetite seemed to suffer much, strangely enough. They must all have been working and fighting hard

enough to need their meals lately, no matter how stressful their journey proved.

Isaac finished first. He made as if to get up, then hesitated and stayed seated. All eyes were on him by the time he started speaking. "Look, Alex, I've got to ask..."

Alex stopped him. "Before you begin, there is something I must say."

"What?"

"I am sorry. I have failed you all. I cannot apologize enough."

"...You what?" Jenna asked, breaking a lengthy silence.

Isaac nudged Ivan. "Is he possessed?"

"I don't think so," Ivan replied, sounding uncertain as he stared at Alex across the table. "It seems like him, as far as I can tell..."

"Why would I be possessed?" Alex asked, somewhat nonplussed by their reaction. "My only goal was to save this world. Now that I have failed, there is nothing I can do but apologize. If I had only been stronger..."

"But we have saved the world. Now that Alchemy has been unsealed, Weyard should start to recover." Piers certainly sounded confused.

"Why do you think was Alchemy sealed in the first place? War is inevitable. Mortal men will seek dominion for its own sake. You barely made it to Prox in time to avert the great apocalypse of our age. The next time the world is at the brink of destruction, you might not be alive to even attempt to save it. If you understood the sheer luck that our planet's

survival has hinged on thus far, you would not be willing to leave its future to chance."

"The Wise One also told us that war would be the end of Weyard," Isaac replied evenly. "It didn't offer a solution, but it seemed to see you as an example of the problem."

Alex knew what the Wise One had told them. He'd lifted parts of his own speech from Kraden's journal.

"I tried to become the solution. Everything I have ever done..."

"You tried to destroy Vale," Isaac reminded him, speaking as calmly as if they were discussing the weather. Which they were, in a way. "How does that fit into your solution?"

"I had a different vision for the landscape. It is fatally easy to slip into thinking that the end justifies the means, and that everyone's quality of life will be improved in the end. I truly cannot apologize enough. In order to secure this world for its people, every action ought to be for their sake. My mistakes were held against me. I could not endure it. I let our only hope slip from my grasp..."

I do not know what the Wise One has done with that portion of the golden sun, but if it has not given it to you, then you must find it, Isaac. You must not fail. I know the Wise One cannot be overcome, but if there is to be any hope, you must... somehow... if there is another way... I'm sorry, I cannot tell you how to succeed where I have failed. After all, if I knew the way, I would not be here."

"What...?" Isaac didn't seem to be following.

"What do you mean, 'that portion'? Is there more to the golden sun than the power that gathered over Mt Aleph?"

Ivan asked.

"What, did Isaac not tell you?" Alex asked, genuinely surprised.

"Am I missing something, here?" Isaac demanded.

"No, you have gained something," Alex told him. "The Wise One imbued the Mars Star with some of the power of the forming golden sun. That power rests even now in your hands."

"What? No. Why... how would it...?" Isaac protested, out of nothing more obstructive than disbelief, if his tone was anything to go by.

"Did you not feel a surge of power after lighting the final beacon?" Alex asked.

"We all did. The beam of fire Psynergy at Mars Lighthouse recharged those of us who were Adepts. That's what Kraden said, isn't it?" Isaac asked, looking to his friends for confirmation.

"I felt recharged, yeah... But I don't feel all that much stronger now than I did beforehand. Is it different for you?" Jenna replied.

Isaac gripped the table, looking quite alarmed.

"Maybe we should go talk to Kraden," Ivan suggested, tugging at Isaac's sleeve.

Isaac let Ivan lead him away. The others stared for a while, before turning back to Alex.

"Got any more surprises for us?" Felix checked.

"...I'm pregnant?" Alex offered.

Felix looked highly alarmed.

"That was a joke," Alex hastily clarified. There was only so much he could do to ease the tension. His performance thus far seemed to have sufficed, for the time being.

With any luck, they would never even realize how terrified he'd been the entire time. Speaking ill of the Wise One, speaking its name aloud, discussing it as if it couldn't hear them... He'd admitted his failure, and he had not announced any intention to oppose it himself, but his speech had still been a gamble. The Wise One 'did not expect' to have reason to hurt him again, which implied that it was still possible to draw its attention. The Adepts on this ship were all capable of effortlessly overpowering him, and they had plenty of reasons to ignore or misinterpret anything he might say. He had to get the message across without angering any of them if he wanted to give the world every chance of survival. If he wanted to die knowing that he really was the man he had always tried to be. That the Wise One had been wrong in every way.

Felix went to pour himself a drink.

Alex sat at the table, his blood pounding in his ears. After a minute, he managed to continue with his meal.

"Here you go." Jenna set a mug of green tea in front of Alex. "I added some potion. Drink up, you look like you need it."

"You do realize I'm not really..." Alex muttered, trailing off as Jenna left.

Piers moved round the table to sit next to him. "Have you decided what you will do next?"

"Not yet," Alex admitted, setting his plate to one side after deciding that the remainder of the meal was a lost cause. He wanted to leave soon, but he hadn't decided on his destination. Whenever he found himself favoring the sea, he remembered how it had felt to drown, and he couldn't commit to the idea of going through that again. On the other hand, whenever he started considering mountains and caves, he couldn't help but imagine someone stumbling across his remains eventually. That would be far too inelegant. When he was gone, he wanted to be forgotten.

Piers nodded and continued, keeping his tone conversational. "Before I joined them, Felix and the others once visited the Kandorean Temple. I hear it's quite close to Daila. Did you ever stop by there?"

"No, I travelled directly to Madra. An inland temple did not sound like a promising place to search for a ship."

"According to Felix, the students at that temple are taught to levitate through meditation. None of them seemed to possess any other special powers, but those who have trained there for long enough are able to make it several feet off the ground through sheer willpower." Piers smiled and made eye contact for a second, checking that he was still following.

"Oh?"

"On a related note, Isaac told me that some of the students at Master Feh's dojo in Xian are also able to use a power that mirrors Psynergy. Through their martial arts training, they learn to focus their body's energy in order to strike at distant objects. Master Feh learned the technique from Ivan's sister, Master Hama, who used to run Lama Temple, though she has now moved back to Contigo. She claims that Psynergy, or Ki,

draws on the power of the mind, and can only be used by Adepts, while Chi draws on the power of the body, and can be learned by anyone. I would imagine that you could learn to fight using Chi quite quickly, if you were interested, since you already possess the focus required to use a similar power."

"...Thank you for letting me know."

Alex had been wondering how he was going to make it to any of the remote locations he'd been considering. Without Psynergy, he couldn't hope to defeat any but the weakest monsters. He could hire an escort if Mia were to let him dip into the Clan's funds, but that would somewhat defeat the point of the journey. Learning Chi might be quicker than learning to use a weapon. The fastest solution would be to pick a coastal town and head for the shore during the quiet hours of the night, but he didn't want to have to work around other people that way. If he were to find somewhere truly isolated, then he would be free to sit and watch the sunset, or the sunrise, or both, and leave once he had seen all he wished to see.

"Sheba and Ivan are both capable of using the teleport lapis to return to any town they've already visited," Piers added. "Between them, they've been just about everywhere. Ivan's the one to ask if you do decide to have a look around the dojo. His group earned the favour of Master Feh's daughter, Feizhi, by freeing another student from the boulders that littered the Alpine Crossing after your group tried to block the road. Feizhi ran into us in Champa recently, and asked Felix to pass on a gift to Isaac in return for his help. You can expect a warm welcome in Xian if Isaac and the others introduce you as a friend of theirs."

"...I cannot imagine anyone describing me as a friend of Isaac's."

"You did ask him to save the world in your stead."

"I am subscribing to the only objectively sensible option left to us. He does not seem to like me any more than..." Alex almost said *'than I like him'*, but he caught himself in time to avoid admitting to any feeling of enmity; "...than you'd expect."

"He was quite blunt, wasn't he?" Piers replied, in a good impression of agreement. "He said some blunt things at Mars Lighthouse, too."

"Did he, now." Alex couldn't entirely hide his annoyance that Piers would talk down to him simply to try to excuse his teammate's behaviour. All the more so because it wouldn't be practical to change the subject; he might hear a few details that Kraden hadn't written down if he played along.

"When we made it to Prox, Felix was told that the other Valean hostages had gone missing shortly before our arrival. When we reached the Lighthouse aerie, the Wise One made us fight a three-headed dragon before it would let us light the beacon. Only Kraden and Isaac realised that the Wise One had transformed the hostages to create our opponent. Kraden tried to stop the fight, but Isaac didn't hesitate to raise his sword against his own father," Piers recounted, filling the air with another stream of sound while Alex studied the grain of the table.

Alex reminded himself that Piers was still talking to him, not past him.

"The hostages regained human form after we defeated them," Piers explained. "At the time, it seemed certain that

they would die. Isaac scolded the rest of us for grieving and complaining, and reminded us that saving the world was our most urgent priority. I think he dented the crush that Jenna had on him, to say the least. In the end, their parents lived, thanks to Alchemy's rebirth, and on the journey home, you'd have had a hard time tearing Isaac away from his father. That boy places the greater good above all else. He'll show no sign of his feelings until they align with his priorities. Isaac helped us heal you yesterday. I do not think he would want to see that effort go to waste."

"Could I get a refill, here?" Alex asked; he'd finished his tea partway through the sermon.

"Certainly."

Piers complied graciously enough. By the time he returned, Alex had decided which way to steer the conversation. If Piers was in the mood to gossip, then he might as well tell him something new.

"Have you decided what you will do next, now that your journey is over?"

"I will have to return to Lemuria soon, in order to report back to King Hydros. I must tell him the outcome of our quest. Once I have fulfilled my duty, I fully intend to return to Angara. I would sooner part with my homeland than with the world beyond its shores. Life is real, out here, though it is certainly different. My life is real, now that I have found the answers I sought. More even than I thought to seek..."

Piers appeared slightly lost in his own thoughts. Alex followed his gaze to the other side of the room, where Felix and Jenna stood by the oven, talking and cradling their drinks.

"You could always take him with you," Alex suggested.

Piers glanced at him in surprise, then smiled faintly.

"Felix would not want to leave his family behind. I want to see more of the world as well. Besides, Felix will be coming with me on this trip, for moral support. He has told me that he does not want the visit to take up more than two or three weeks of our time, bearing in mind the situation out here. I told him that I was happy to oblige, but I'd have been no less surprised if he'd asked that we restrict our visit to the length of two or three minutes. Our senses of time truly do not scale... I left things in so much chaos the last time I departed Lemuria, there is no chance that we will be able to turn in our report with the slightest pretense at civility or due process, but I would rather inform the King of the essential facts with all undue haste than delay the trip until we have all the time in the world to spare. Nobody out here has that sort of time to waste."

"Yet you do not mind wasting my time," Alex muttered. An instant later, he froze, wondering how he could have forgotten himself. He made himself look at Piers, to find out whether he'd insulted him enough that his safety on this ship would be affected.

"Is there anything you'd rather discuss?" Piers asked kindly.

Alex turned back to his drink, hating himself for feeling such bone-deep relief at such a contemptible question.

"Do you and Felix have plans in mind for after your return from Lemuria?" Alex asked carefully.

"We won't be staying here. That much is certain. Ivan has been helping Isaac relocate his family to the Sanctum at Kalay, along with a few others from around the camp. Those

who are too old or sick to help rebuild cannot be expected to stay under these conditions. It is widely assumed that they will move back once their health has recovered, but for the most part, I do not think that they intend to. People have been drifting away ever since the evacuation. Some are seizing their chance to see the world, in the hope that it will last long enough for them to make their way in it. Others have left over disagreements of one sort or another. Apparently, one group tried to insist on giving you a chance to repent shortly after you arrived. The mayor wasted little time in exiling them. There have been arguments over supplies, and fights with nearby settlements. I do not expect the chaos to completely abate any time in the foreseeable future."

"Why am I not surprised?" Alex laced his fingers around the drink, soaking up warmth from the hot ceramic. "These people are hopelessly inept."

Piers gave him an odd look. "Somehow, I did not expect that to be your first criticism of them."

"It is true enough. The Wise One defeated me. The Valeans accomplished nothing." He felt his voice turn harsh, and took a sip of hot tea. The truth was a neutral matter, and he should be capable of speaking it in a neutral tone if he so chose. Only one's opinions on it required feeling. Though he lost volume, his next sentence sounded more even. "They merely prolonged the inevitable outcome."

"Do you feel that this was inevitable?"

Do you realise what you are up against, if you try to act with the world's best interests at heart? He held back from speaking his mind, keeping his gaze fixed on his hands. He

had to be very careful before casting aspersions on the Wise One.

"Alex. What happened out there was not inevitable." Piers leaned in, taking a serious tone. "You did not deserve it."

Alex was glad he hadn't been drinking at that moment, or he'd have choked. *Deserve it? I should think not.*

"Those are two separate matters." Alex came up with a quick reply this time, in order to head him off. It was not important to correct Piers so much as find out why he was thinking this way, in such stark contrast to the others.

"The individuals involved were all capable of making their own decisions. Their actions were completely indefensible, and they certainly did not demonstrate the only way of dealing with a captive. To call it inevitable - "

"The Wise One knew what it was after all along," Alex interrupted. Piers ought to watch who he was contradicting. "No matter how the humans behaved, it would have made the same demands. I would not have given up the golden sun under any other circumstances. Not in exchange for your life," he added pointedly, "or your friends' lives, or the lives of any fraction of Weyard's population. In the long run, it would not have been worth it."

"You would not have failed if failure were not truly inevitable." Piers' reply was somewhere between a statement and a question.

"Precisely."

"I can see how it serves you to think that way," Piers mused, sounding ever more troubled.

"I did not know you had it in you to be this obnoxious. When Felix picked you up as my replacement, he did not make such a bad call."

"That came out wrong. I apologise." Piers glanced down, then met his gaze again, frowning slightly. "You are honestly able to look back and conclude that you could not have done more. Earlier, you spoke of being held accountable for your mistakes. I thought..."

"You told me to win Felix's trust. The last time we spoke at length, he expressed a belief that I could have done more. Isaac, on the other hand, seems to believe that I ought to have done less."

Piers leaned his arms on the table and folded his hands in a white-knuckled grip. "As you have gathered, Isaac believes the accusation that the Wise One caught you attacking Vale."

"And you don't?"

"Criminals always have their excuses. Of course they would claim that you did everything imaginable to provoke them."

"I did not deny it."

"We have not kept the Wise One away from you. We have not given you the freedom to dispute its accusations. I can at least assure you that I do not believe a word of the Valeans' excuses, and I do not think less of you for sticking to their story if that is your only option. If there is anything I can do to help, you need not explain your reasoning or implicate anyone. You need only ask, and I will do whatever I can to improve your situation."

Piers had good instincts, even though he was wrong in this particular case. No healer would last long in the job if they believed the aggressor over the patient. Some injuries were not the result of an accident or a misunderstanding, especially when it was the fifth time in as many months. A silent patient was not usually a lying little shit who had asked for it, and enjoyed it, and deserved it anyway.

Mia had always been able to hold fast to the idea that she was making a difference. How he had envied her. The hardest part of Sanctum work wasn't saving lives, it was letting people live. He had left to free himself from that burden, and to make a difference on a larger scale.

If Piers' sympathy was dependent on the belief that he had not been caught 'attacking Vale', then he ought to be wary of the mind readers. No, on second thought, they were hardly going to be tempted, were they? If Isaac had helped with the healing despite believing the worst of him, then perhaps he had shown more strength of character. Then again, Piers and the others had probably heard 'attacking Vale' as 'trying to kill everyone in Vale'. As if he had known from the start that they deserved no less.

"Do they think I was born yesterday?" Piers ranted, having apparently retreated into his own thoughts during the silence. "Even when relations between our parties were at their worst, you praised us for using non-violent methods of conflict resolution. At Jupiter Lighthouse, you refused to let anyone die. I heard from Felix that you did not allow yourself to be pushed into fighting even when your former leaders could not be turned from that path. Even if we have fallen out over other issues, we have no reason to believe that you would act completely contrary to the example you have set through your words and deeds. I cannot believe the others

would be so easily swayed by malicious slander, that they would feel any uncertainty..."

"They know me better."

"Since I do not know you, I must make all the more effort to place myself in your shoes."

"Shoes. Now that you mention it, I do not have any. Would you care to fetch a pair?"

Piers nodded, not seeming particularly thrown by the question. "I couldn't find any spares earlier. Once Ivan returns with the teleport lapis, we can ask him to go shopping. Why don't we look through the store rooms in the meantime? I doubt I left every stone unturned."

"I would be grateful if you would search again. If it's all the same to you, I will remain in the common room, where there are plenty of people around." Alex summoned a thin smile to soften the demand. If Piers was as mature as he seemed, he would understand.

"Oh. As you wish." Piers looked away, only slightly flustered. "Would you like me to look now?"

"Please. I will need them if I am to reach the dojo in Xian on my own two feet. Or do you intend to carry me over the threshold?"

Piers vacated the room at a decent speed.

Damn. So much for playing nice with the Adepts. Well, he could still go easy on the others. He glanced at Felix and Jenna, hoping they hadn't overheard the *'not in exchange for your life, or your friends' lives, or the lives of any fraction*

of Weyard's population' fragment of the conversation. It only made sense in context.

If he was going to try earning their favour, there was no time like the present. He left his plate with the rest of the dishes, then approached Jenna.

"I do not believe I have thanked you - "

"Oh! No, no, it's fine," Jenna interrupted, taking half a step back. "What else could we do? I... I'd better go clean the room again, while I have time. Earlier, I think I saw - on the ceiling - there was, um, spurting - not that you needed to know that - I mean, not that you couldn't have guessed as much - I-I'd better go take a look..."

She left her glass on the counter and hurried away, turning slightly red.

Even if she honestly did not blame him, she might never be comfortable around him again. Not that he needed to deal with her, in particular.

Felix held up his glass. "Want some?"

It smelled like fruit wine. Quite seasonal, and quite strong.

"No, thank you."

Felix nodded, and drained his glass.

Alex returned to his seat at the table. He had told Piers that he would wait here, and there was nowhere else he wished to go, at least until the Jupiter Adepts returned.

Felix sat down at a desk at the other end of the room, and started writing in a notebook he fished out from one of his

pockets. It was a shame he hadn't left it lying around in his bedroom. Then again, Felix was already fairly easy to read.

Alex braced his elbows on the table, trying not to get tired. There was nowhere to go. As long as Felix stayed with him, nothing was likely to happen until Piers or the others returned. The Wise One had only ever attacked him when he was alone. There was nothing stopping it from appearing now, but it didn't seem to want to treat the others the same way, and it surely knew that they would pitch a fit if it tried anything in front of them.

When he returned to that bed, he would find out whether the Wise One had anything to say about his little speech. Unless it was going to wait until he thought he was in the clear, then teach him otherwise. If he made it to the dojo this evening, it would have to take him elsewhere to deal with him alone, which meant he would not have to sleep in the spot where he had been tortured. There were other bedrooms on this ship, but they all looked the same. It might not let him go, next time, but on the other hand, there might not be a next time at all. Perhaps he could only escape by slitting his wrists first. Perhaps he would only attract punishment by attempting suicide as a way of escaping judgement. He couldn't second-guess the Wise One. It knew what he was thinking, and it would do exactly as it pleased. Still, he could spare himself some mental turmoil in the meantime. He wouldn't lie awake waiting. He would sit here, waiting for someone else.

If Felix had left someone other than a djinni at his bedside... Well, it was no use thinking about it now. They had thought that a djinni would be enough.

Where was Mia, anyway? He might have expected to find his family sitting vigil by the bed. He hadn't expected it, at the

time, but she might have expected him to expect it. Since the others hadn't forwarded on an explanation, her absence might have been a deliberate statement. Why did she think he'd left her behind? He had tried to keep her out of danger, and in the end, she had been the one to survive every challenge. If she did not see him before he died, wouldn't she regret it?

Where was the Tomegathericon? He needed a distraction. He would have to find that bag again. Unless it had been ruined. Or he could help Jenna with the cleaning. No, his legs were too heavy to move. She would only get skittish, anyway. There were too many empty rooms...

He jolted awake as the door slammed. When had he drifted off? His arms had gone numb; he shouldn't have slept at the table. Isaac swept through the room. Felix grabbed his arm before he reached the other door.

"What's wrong?" Felix asked.

Alex blinked, trying to figure out how Isaac's manner suggested that anything was wrong. Isaac stared at Felix for a moment, then shook his head as if to clear it. They both headed for the table.

"It's Mia," Isaac sighed, falling into a chair. "Apparently, a group of guys started harrassing her. They got in her way, listed the things they'd done to *him*, and promised to treat her no better. They didn't get far before she laid them flat with Deluge and stabbed each of them in the groin with the Atropos Rod."

While Alex was processing this information, the Venus Adepts turned to look at him. They seemed to expect some kind of reaction.

"...Oh. I suppose I should thank her."

"I'm not sure she did it for you," Isaac replied. "We had to get her out of there in a hurry, so Ivan teleported her back to Imil. I'm going to pack up the rest of her stuff. Ivan should be back for it soon enough. We can drop you off too, while we're at it."

"How thoughtful of you to return all her possessions."

Either Isaac missed the sarcasm, or he ignored it.

"I can't believe she would lose it like that. It's not as if they don't deserve it, but..." Isaac leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment. "I'm sure Holly wants children... Though I guess she wouldn't have stayed with him anyway, after all this..."

Felix set a glass of wine in front of his friend. "Right. It's not as if they don't deserve it."

Isaac took a sip, letting Felix's point stand.

Alex heard the door creak, and glanced round in time to see Sheba poke her head into the room. She blanched at the sight of him, and quickly disappeared.

"Don't take offence," Isaac told him. "I know for a fact that she's worried about you. She tried to help out with the healing, but she kept crying and leaving, and coming back and crying again. We told her that we had everything under control, and that she should make herself useful elsewhere. She must have just needed to see for herself that you're all right. I mean, I know, you're not, but..."

"I get the drift," Alex told him. He couldn't stand listening to him fumble for words.

Isaac nodded, and returned to his drink. After a minute, he looked up and hesitated before speaking again.

"I also... I don't know if you remember what happened when we found you, but I've got something to apologise for. I left everything to the others, at first. I don't think I'd have left if I'd been the only one who could have done something. I went back once the situation registered. Still, if anyone had walked out on me..."

"I understand."

"All right, then."

Alex couldn't say that it was all right, though he was trying to give Isaac that impression. He had only said that he understood. People were generally not hard to understand.

"It was the last thing I expected," Isaac continued. "To go in steeled for one last fight to protect everyone, and instead find... Well, my parents wanted to know what was going on. They snapped me out of it. I had to sort it out for their sake, you know?"

"Surely Dora knew perfectly well what was happening."

"No, she'd been resting in the sanctum ever since the evacuation. She's been ill lately, and all the worry and commotion made it worse. She only really woke up when she heard that I was back. I swear, she had no idea what they'd done to you. She didn't even know you were at the camp."

"Well, then. I suppose she is the closest thing to an innocent in Vale."

"She's completely innocent!" Isaac insisted, raising his voice for a moment. "She... she helped out too. She's the one who

cut your hair."

Alex stared at Isaac's unkempt tresses. "That explains it."

Isaac went slightly red, but he avoided raising his voice again. "She tried to cut out all the burnt bits, and save the rest."

"I am sure she did the best she could."

"That's right. She did." Isaac threw him another mild glare. "You look great."

Alex laughed, to his own surprise. "Should I take that as a compliment?"

"I think you'd better," Felix replied.

"Felix!"

"Listen to yourself, would you?"

"I assure you both, I have taken no offense, nor sought to cause any." Alex tried to gauge whether the Adepts had rubbed each other the wrong way. Felix still appeared to be at ease around his friend.

"Are you sure about that?" Isaac asked. "I mean, it wouldn't be the end of the world. I don't expect you to have the patience of a saint, or to resemble one in any other way."

"... I honestly do not know what to make of you, Isaac. Your earlier questions implied that you did see me as the end of the world. Or at least, as an 'example of the problem'."

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think you were capable of answering."

Taking that as a good sign, Alex shifted his chair to more directly face Isaac, and drew a steadying breath. "Have you given any thought to the matter of the golden sun? If you were to safeguard it - "

"I won't go looking for trouble."

"Will you ensure that you are capable of preventing trouble, if comes looking for you?"

"If I hear what's become of the golden sun, I'll act as I see fit."

"I can ask nothing more."

"Right. What do you think would happen if I tried to summon and interrogate the Wise One at your bidding? I can't picture that scenario going well for either of us."

"No - I - I am not - " Alex felt his throat close up, and tried to focus on breathing. Did Isaac have to sling that name around so casually?

"Breathe," Felix advised.

"I know! I am breathing."

"Will you be ready to leave, once Ivan gets back?" Isaac checked. "You'll need to wrap up warmer than that if you're going back to Imil."

"Actually, I have already made plans to travel to Xian."

"Xian? Why?"

"I intend to speak to Master Feh about learning Chi."

Isaac stared at him for a few seconds before venturing a reply. "You want to learn kung fu?"

"No, I am only interested in learning Chi."

"That's how they teach Chi. Through kung fu."

"Piers mentioned - "

"Did Piers put you up to this?" Isaac sighed and shook his head. "You should go home and sort things out with Mia."

"Thank you for your input. Piers mentioned that the disciples at the Kandorean Temple learn to levitate through meditation. He suggested that this was another form of Chi."

"I guess if you want to levitate, meditation could help you get light-headed, or something. If you want to fight using your body's energy, though, you'd need to get into shape," Isaac told him, gesturing vaguely with his hands. "Master Feh's students have to practice martial arts for years before they can extend the reach of their strikes with a burst of Chi. Would you be okay with one of them throwing a punch at you, even if it didn't connect? Would you be okay with someone grabbing you to practice a hold? When they throw each other, they hit the mat pretty hard. Feizhi told me that the first thing everyone has to learn is how to fall."

"I will still speak to Master Feh, on the offchance that he can suggest any alternative forms of training."

"Good luck with that."

"Thank you. If Mia does not wish to visit me in Xian, I might return to Imil afterwards. I do not wish to cause her any upset."

"It's a little late to start thinking about sparing her feelings."

"Did she say anything to you...?" Alex glanced at Felix, wondering what kind of impression his clanmate had made on the Venus Adepts.

"I don't think it's my place to say." Isaac's gaze didn't stray. "I don't really know the history between you two. Honestly, you need to speak to her yourself."

"Very well. For now, could I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"On the way to Mars Lighthouse, did you run into Karst and Agatio? I have not yet heard news of them."

If Isaac's account matched Kraden's, then Alex would have a clearer idea of how honestly Isaac was willing to speak.

"Oh. Yes, we found them on the way up. They tried to light it themselves, and died in the attempt." Isaac paused, then continued in a softer tone. "I know you didn't travel with them for long, and you didn't get along, but if you have any unresolved questions, we could take you to Prox first. Felix has already spoken to their next of kin."

"I see. There is no need. I do have one more question for you."

"Go ahead."

"Who is Marcus?"

It was Isaac's turn to blanch. Perhaps it wasn't such a surprise that Sheba had fled outright.

"He's a cartwright. I never knew him well. He disappeared yesterday. A lot of people have been leaving. I don't know about him in particular. He might have told someone. I haven't kept on top of everything that's going on."

"I have heard that things have been chaotic. It does not matter, but I thought it would be as well to ask."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"You have done enough."

Isaac nodded, looking relieved to drop the subject. "I'd better go and get Mia's things together."

"Of course."

Alex glanced at Felix as Isaac left them to their own company again. He seemed deep in his own world. Piers would be back soon, wouldn't he?

Though he resolved to stay awake, Alex dozed off again in the quiet warmth of the common room. He woke when the door slammed again, and tried to get his bearings. Felix's cloak was pillowed under his head, but the Venus Adept was nowhere in sight. As Alex sat up and tried to get a few stray strands of hair out of his eyes, Gareth marched up to the table. He did not look happy.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" Gareth demanded.

"I am not sure I understand - "

"I don't understand, either."

"Well, that makes two of us."

"Don't." Gareth pointed an accusing finger at him. "Don't you dare start."

"...What?"

"My sister was crying over you." He slammed his hand on the table. "It was boiling water, or something. She said she took a swing at you when you first washed up here. She thought I was dead. Do you understand? You waltz in here and try to wipe out everything and everyone she's ever known, she takes one swing at you, and as soon as I show up alive, she starts saying she was wrong, blaming herself, and I - I know that's not right. You can't tell me that's right."

"Believe me, I wish she had nothing to regret."

"Don't do that!"

"I would gladly oblige you if you would tell me what - "

"Stop talking as if you know better than the rest of us, while wreaking more havoc than anyone." Gareth glared, still fuming even while Alex tried to play it safe by staying silent. "I'd have thought they'd have beaten that out of you."

"Felix has decided - "

"Who cares what Felix says? I've got to do what I think is right."

"..."

"Do you think I don't know what's in store if we let you leave? You don't need Psynergy to take revenge. They messed up, but they're my family. I can't let you - they're still my family. You should never have come here. This wouldn't have happened if you'd had the sense to stay

away. Do you know what it's like out there? At least you're still alive."

"I am aware that people have died." Alex spoke quietly, keeping his gaze lowered.

"Right, and they won't be the last. I know why the others want to let you walk away. None of this should ever have happened. They should have killed you on day one. You're not going to draw a line under the past, no matter what anyone else has gone through. Once you've got money, allies, supplies, whatever you need in place of Psynergy - I can see it already. All the streets filled with bodies. What do their lives mean to you? What have they ever meant to you? How has anything changed? Can you give me one good reason not to put you in the ground right now, huh? Can you explain to me how you're any different now, or how they're any better protected? Can you name one thing that's actually changed?"

"We have all changed."

"Nice try," Gareth snarled, drawing his sword.

Alex knew there would be no point in trying to run from a powerful Adept. "Piers will - "

Gareth overturned the table, letting its edge crash into the wall. He kicked Alex's chair out from beneath him.

Alex landed on his side, and closed his eyes. He had argued on principle, but trying to fight would mean dragging this out. He'd long since had more than enough. Gareth only wanted to kill him. There were worse ways to die.

He waited, but didn't feel the final strike. Why must everyone keep him waiting?

He heard Gareth sheath his sword, and felt a tremor of foreboding. If he had decided not to make it quick, after all... When he opened his eyes, Gareth was walking away. He left without looking back.

Alex watched the door swing closed. His ribs hurt. The place was a mess. Why should he be left to deal with this? He doubted he could even lift the table from where it had fallen. The floorboards didn't seem to have been cleaned in months, and it had sounded as though some of the dishes had broken. He was a dead man walking, and still he was mired here, where everything was such a mess. He would be truly beyond caring, beyond consequence, if Gareth had not proven to be such a coward.

He closed his eyes again, and wondered whether Gareth would come back.

Someone else came running from within the ship.

"Alex? I heard a crash, what was - what happened here?" Piers knelt by him, and started casting Ply while waiting for an answer.

What would be gained by giving him a teammate's name, and stirring up more arguments? Who knew who else might come to rant at him for causing trouble for a loved one? He would do better not to provoke anyone.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Piers repeated. "Or do you want me to - "

"A dragon appeared," Alex answered, thinking of the Mars Clan's ultimate technique. They would only draw on that form to protect their kin. "It flew away on its own."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Did you forget to lock the door?"

"We only lock it at night, or when we are all out. I did not expect the others to leave. It is certainly fortunate that I was in the vicinity."

Piers offered him a hand. Alex managed without it, and let Piers lead him over to the desk. He might as well sit down.

"I will clean up, but first, why don't you see if these fit?" Piers asked, bringing out a pair of sandals. "They used to be Jenna's, and they will probably be too small, but there was nothing else. Oh, they're far too small, aren't they?"

"Nevermind. Thank you for looking."

"Shall I make you a drink while I'm tidying?"

"No, I am fine."

Alex watched Piers bustle around for a while, then left to take another look below deck. If Isaac was still in the girls' room, he could ask him to wait for Ivan in the camp and fetch him as soon as possible.

He heard Jenna's voice as he approached the door, though he couldn't tell who she was talking to.

"...padding around barefoot. I mean, '*good morning*' and '*I'm sorry*'? Does he even realise..."

Alex reached the stairs at the end of the corridor. That hadn't sounded like the kind of conversation he wanted to overhear, or interrupt. He couldn't help thinking that it was quite remiss of her to use 'barefoot' as an insult when they were the ones who hadn't given him any shoes.

There was a spare bag in the first store room he searched. A crate full of books also contained a few pieces of charcoal wrapped in scrap paper. Kraden had been sketching tropical plants on loose sheets of parchment.

If he had asked Reflux to bring Kraden back to the ship, then maybe Piers wouldn't be the only one capable of taking all of this in stride.

He sat by the wall and stared at a page in one of the books, watching the words blur together. His limbs were still heavy. No matter how many times Piers cast Ply, it never took long for his muscles to start aching with tension again. Adepts were more powerful than everyone else. The strength they could command, the falls they could survive... Even if he recovered the lost muscle mass, his body would still be unfamiliar. His reflexes were shot. What was he doing here? What was he honestly hoping to achieve by messing around at a dojo? Why was he worrying about Mia when she clearly did not wish to see him? Why was he trying to spare his rescuers' feelings when he was willing to take the next chance to lie down and die? Why was he planning a convoluted journey that would give the dispersed Valeans a chance to catch up with him? He couldn't let Marcus or Don or any of the others lay a hand on him again. He couldn't go back to Imil. He had to find a weapon. It was the quickest, surest way out. He had to take things into his own hands without wasting time. He would place himself forever beyond their reach.

What if Mia had stayed off the ship because she'd been as floored as Sheba? Maybe she had intended to visit him, until her friends had hurried her away to escape Volean law. He could at least write her a note.

He started writing on the back of one of Kraden's drawings.

Mia.

I'm proud of you. That might not mean much, but you deserve it. You deserve to hear it from someone. And it would not be appropriate from your peers; they ought to look up to you, the last heir of the Mercury Clan.

He paused to read it over, folding his hands in an effort to stop them shaking. As a letter, it was perhaps slightly impersonal. Keeping in mind that this was his last chance to send word, was this all he wanted to say to her?

If you would kill any of the people responsible, for my sake, I would greatly appreciate it.

That was enough. There was no need to sign it; she would know exactly who it was from.

He took another look at the sketch. Though they were smudged, the fronded leaves and waxy petals seemed to hold a life of their own. Kraden had a keen eye for detail.

He left the parchment lying on top of the crate, and went to look through a large chest nearby. It was packed full of clothing and armour. He started sorting through it, trying to keep his mind off some of the other details in Kraden's records.

The doom dragon had been a test. Kraden was sure of it, and Felix and Isaac had agreed, once he'd helped them make sense of it. Alex tossed a handful of bracelets and tiaras aside, looking for weapons. Isaac had wanted to know why the Wise One had made them try to kill their own parents. Kraden had ventured that it was a test of character, and recorded the conversation in his journal.

'Will we use Alchemy to wage war, to raise armies? Or will we use it to grow wise, to rise above our petty feuds and perform great deeds? You were willing to sacrifice everything for your quest. I'd say you've risen to this challenge.'

If Isaac had not realised in advance that he was fighting his father – if he'd thought it simply another battle, the way his teammates had, without believing that he was making a great personal sacrifice – then would the Wise One have permitted them to light Mars Lighthouse, even if they had won? Kraden wasn't sure. He had even suggested, in the privacy of his journal, that Felix's alliances had cost his party the benefit of the doubt. When the Wise One had told them of Alex's plans, it had been more or less correct in referring to him as a friend of theirs.

Had his own triplicate dragons been a test? He had thought he'd figured it out in the pillory. The Wise One had not been truly asking him anything; it had sought only to break his spirit, to tell him that he was powerless and unworthy in terms he could not ignore.

If Isaac, Felix and Jenna had fought their parents in complete ignorance, watched them die, and still been prevented from lighting the beacon, would they have been able to make sense of the cruelty? If they had completely failed in their mission, would they have been able to figure out what kind of test they had been facing, or where they had gone wrong?

The Wise One had not forced him to fight immediately. If he had answered its questions differently, and used his Psynergy more carefully, might he have gained a hint about how to defeat the stone dragons? Could he have won for reasons the Wise One would have approved of? His intentions might not have been far off track. After all, Isaac

would always have fought to save the world, whether or not he'd figured out the doom dragon's identity. There was a chance the Wise One had not necessarily intended to drain the golden sun from him all along. If it had been determined to keep the golden sun from falling into human hands, it would not have let Isaac keep a portion. *'You are scum'* had sounded like an unequivocal announcement of total opposition, but was it really all that different from *'Betrayers, you have arrived'*?

Even after he had lost at Mt Aleph, the Wise One had taken a long time to appear before him again. When it had told the Valeans to finish him off, it might only have been passing along his request. When it had appeared on the ship, he might have failed some kind of final chance by giving in to its demands. Was there a comparison to be made if the Wise One had made Isaac fight the people he hoped to protect, whereas it had made him fight the land he hoped to rule? If Isaac had been expected to sacrifice that which he held dearest by letting his family suffer, had he likewise been expected to sacrifice his own happiness for a greater cause by suffering without giving up his determination? If he had refused the Wise One until the end, would he have passed, and kept his powers? Or would he truly have been in for twelve thousand years of unendurable torture? Would he have lost his senses and been unable to understand or answer the Wise One by the time it gave him a chance to change his mind?

If the Wise One considered rape a valid test, then it didn't matter that he thought it was wrong. It didn't matter that he thought it inhuman in the most literal sense, unable to appreciate the brutal damage it inflicted through human experience and unwilling to show godly compassion. If it had seen it as a test, then it had still been a missed opportunity,

a failure that could have been a success if he had known how to handle it. If he had failed at being raped...

He couldn't second-guess himself. He couldn't live that way. The Wise One had only waited before appearing here because it had known exactly how close he'd been to figuring out its omnipresence. He'd reached that breaking point on his own. Why were there no weapons in this dratted room? Had the Adepts cleared it out? Perhaps he should go insult Garet... No, that was a bad idea.

He sat down by one of the open crates, too woozy to immediately move on to the next room. He could afford to take a short rest. It would be better not to speak to the others again. Even when they thought they were helping, they were difficult to handle. Piers and his world-weary naivety... Isaac and his dear innocent mother...

It would be easy to dismiss Isaac's indignance regarding his mother. How likely was it that she had heard nothing of his fate, even if she had been ill? Even if he gave her the benefit of the doubt in that respect, how likely was it that the knowledge would have prompted her to behave any better than her neighbours? None of them had intervened. They had been born and raised together, and whatever minor differences of opinion existed between them had not kept them from acting as a coherent community. He had no reason to assume that any Valean was different, that any of them deserved to live, whether or not they were as guilty as the rest.

However, by that logic, Felix and the others were equally worthless. He honestly did not blame Jenna or Kyle, or anyone else who had not been there, and whom he already knew. Not all of them had been gone from their hometown for terribly long. If a few months' absence was all it took to

teach a Valean to look past the indoctrination of their upbringing and act as a distinct individual, then he could not claim that those who remained were irredeemably corrupted even if they had committed no crime.

If he had left this ship with his powers intact and targeted the Valean refugees as a group, he could have claimed that he had done more good than harm by wiping out the worst of them, but Isaac would still have been right to protest that his mother had been innocent. If the others had not seen sense regarding their families, they would simply have been wrong, but Isaac would have had a legitimate grievance.

If they had fought, the others would all have taken Isaac's side. Perhaps Mia would have felt pressed to sit it out, but he doubted it. (She had never been shy of arguing when she thought he was wrong. He had usually been the one to call a truce, while she had usually been suspicious of whether he truly meant it, with good reason. He had, perhaps, patronised her slightly too much.)

They would not have been glad to fight him, so soon after rescuing him. Healing him from that wretched state seemed to have been a traumatic experience, at least for some of them. They would not have been happy to see their hard work and self-sacrifice wasted, but they would have cut him down all the same.

Still, he would not necessarily have killed Dora, even if he had remained an Adept. He would have needed to rest on the ship for a while longer, and he surely would have spoken to Isaac while he was recovering. He might well have come to the same conclusion, that Isaac was right about his mother. He might have developed powerful enough Psynergy to see into the hearts and minds of those who

stood before him, and bestow punishment upon those who deserved it beyond all doubt.

He needn't waste much energy defending himself in his own mind when he had already decided to run away. Could he call it his own decision, when he had so few choices? Gareth had suggested that he could survive without Psynergy, but it was not as simple as that. He had too many enemies. Word would spread. He would never be anonymous. Even if he found allies, he would find no guarantee that his enemies would not corner him again. He couldn't live with that risk, every minute of every day.

Even if it was a valid choice, he had decided to run away, and on top of that, he'd asked his baby cousin to deal with people he didn't have the courage to face.

Alex lifted a shield off the floor and studied his distorted reflection. Gareth had looked at him and believed that he would find the resources to deal with those people without incurring the Wise One's wrath. He'd spoken to him and accused him of acting as if he knew best. Staring at his reflection, he tried to see whatever self-assurance or lingering potential the Mars Adept had seen. Perhaps it was a pointless exercise. Hadn't he left once he'd been proven wrong?

Nevertheless, he shouldn't label himself a coward. He had chosen to stay for long enough to settle matters with Isaac. Admittedly, he hadn't accomplished much, but he'd done all he could, and it had not been without risk.

He returned Kraden's sketch to the pile of drawings, and leaned on the closed crate for another brief rest. He needed more time to think. He'd been inside for long enough that he was starting to miss natural light. Hadn't he wanted to

watch at least one more sunrise? Piers would watch out for him until the morning, if he asked. He could afford to take the next few hours at his own pace.

He heard footsteps, and looked up in time to see Jenna step into the room and knock hesitantly on the open door.

"Is it okay... um, do you have a second?" Her voice went down in volume, and up in pitch, as she glanced at the clutter strewn across the floor.

"Jenna?"

She walked up to the crate and set down a handful of copper coins.

"I sort of... stole this from you in Alhafra," she admitted. "I thought this would be the time to return it."

"Yes, it would."

He held her gaze. She bit her lip and turned steadily more red. She almost seemed as though she wanted to say more, but in the end, she nodded and left.

The coins weren't worth much. She clearly hadn't had much nerve, even at the time. He'd assumed that someone had shortchanged him.

When he tried to put the money away in a pocket, he found out that this tunic didn't have any. He slipped it into his bag instead. He wouldn't have minded if she'd kept it, but turning it down would only have made her feel worse. Better to let her think he'd have need of it eventually.

Piers and Felix were sitting at the table when Alex returned to the common room. On closer inspection, he noticed that Felix was sleeping at the table, next to a glass of water, while Piers watched him with a faint half-smile on his face.

Alex coughed. Piers looked up, and Felix frowned in his sleep.

"Have you heard from Ivan yet?" Alex checked.

"No. I would not expect him back at this time of night. He is probably sleeping in Imil, or at the camp. I am sure he will return in the morning," Piers replied.

Alex nodded. It had gotten cold, so he'd thought it must have gotten late. He'd put on an undershirt before leaving the store rooms.

"If he has decided to stay with Mia, she will be in better shape the next time you see her," Piers added.

"I hope he will be able to comfort her," Alex replied, going along with whatever Piers wanted to believe. "If teleportation is not available, would you fly the ship to a safer area? I am sure it would not take long to reach Xian by air."

"Certainly, though it will have to wait until morning. We would not be able to see where we were going if we tried to fly at night. It would be too dangerous."

"Very well. You have locked the door, haven't you?"

"Yes. We will be safe here overnight."

Alex nodded, and tried to piece together his next request. "If I am to rest here... The table is not terribly comfortable.

However, I would prefer it if we were to stay together until the morning."

"Of course we will stay with you. Would you like to sleep in our room, if we bring in a spare bed?"

"If Felix does not mind."

"I am sure it will be fine." Piers shook Felix's arm until he blinked awake.

"Mmgh?" Felix looked terribly groggy, squinting in the dim light. He must have overindulged on the wine before switching to water.

"Why doesn't Alex stay in our room tonight? I am sure he will feel safer that way."

"Uh. Both of you? In our...?" Felix swayed as he sat up, blinking at Alex. "I, uh, whatever you want? I mean I always wished you'd known you could turn to us, and I wouldn't mind, if we'd all fit, it's not that big a bed, but I thought you didn't think that much of me - "

"Please excuse us." Piers gave Alex a strained smile, then pulled Felix out of the room.

Alex waited for a few minutes. He could hear that they were speaking in the hallway, though the conversation itself wasn't audible.

When they returned, Felix grabbed the back of a chair for support and cleared his throat.

"Piers told me to say sorry. Wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable by... something. Oh. And it's fine. Really fine."

"Now, let's go fetch that spare bed," Piers added, his tone light with brittle cheer.

Piers dragged one across from an empty room. He pushed his own bed further along the wall, making space by the door for the new one. Felix leaned on the wall to keep his balance, well away from Alex, and crawled under the blanket as soon as Piers was done.

"He's useless sometimes," Piers whispered, sounding more apologetic than Felix.

"I know. Saturos never used to let him drink."

"Shall I find you a nightshirt?"

"No, I do not feel that I have worn this outfit long enough to change out of it."

"Wake us if you need anything."

"Thank you. Good night."

The covers on this bed were a different colour – dark blue, rather than white – and the soundscape was different, with Felix breathing deeply and Piers dimming the lantern, leaving enough light to illuminate the outlines of everything in the room. Following their lead, Piers did not get changed out of his day clothes before lying down to rest beside Felix. He probably wanted to be ready for anything during the night.

Alex was warm enough, and he could hear nothing from the rest of the ship, nor any outside noise. Whenever he glanced at the other bed, the Adepts were still sleeping, exactly as he had seen them last. The tranquillity of the night felt alien, as if it could be shattered at any second. The night

before last played out again in his mind, and he turned to take another look at the others. Felix was a useless drunk, not a violent one. Alex still needed rest, and his exhaustion eventually took over.

He woke when he heard someone moving around. When he opened his eyes, he saw Felix stumble past and leave the room. He didn't seem to have woken Piers.

A few minutes later, Felix returned and made an effort to close the door quietly. He rubbed his head as he took a couple of steps into the room, then fell face-down onto the closest bed, sprawling heavily on top of the blanket.

Alex drew away, fully intending to ask him what he thought he was doing, just as soon as he remembered how to breathe.

"Did I wake you?" Felix muttered, without lifting his face from the pillow. "Sorry. Gotta get back to sleep. We can't wake Alex. Poor bastard needs all the rest he can get."

Alex shifted further away, wondering what to say to that.

"M'sorry," Felix continued, hearing the movement. "Settle down, alright? I'll fuck you in the morning. Chains and everything. I'll make it count."

Alex watched Felix fall back asleep. When there seemed to be little chance of waking him, he climbed over the end of the bed and headed for the far wall. He did not need to listen to Felix sticking his foot any further in his mouth until morning, when he might actually have the energy for it. He'd already learned more than he wished to know about Piers and Felix's love life.

The floor was not very comfortable, compared to the bed. There were plenty more spare rooms, but they would be even worse. Jenna was staying in the girls' room, wasn't she? Alex headed for the door. He didn't need to put up with this.

When Felix woke, he was surprised to find he had the mattress to himself. Had Piers already gone to make breakfast? He sat up with a wince and glanced around, wondering how Alex was faring.

"Piers? What are you doing over there?"

"Eh?" Piers rubbed his eyes and took a moment to wake up. "What am I...? What are you doing over there? That was where Alex was sleeping."

"No, we're always... Oh shit, it was, wasn't it?" Felix fell back into the pillow. "Fuck, I'm an idiot..."

"What did you do?"

"I got up during the night, and got back in the wrong bed. I told you to go back to sleep – I mean, I thought it was you – and followed my own advice."

"I can see how that would have made him uncomfortable. Why don't you stay here while I try to find him?"

"I also, um, might have said something about having sex in the morning..."

"I see. I will convey your apologies to him."

"Thanks. I'll... wait out the hangover, I guess..."

Piers laid a hand on his shoulder and spared a second to cast Ply.

"I really, truly, do not know what I would do without you," Felix added.

"Believe it or not, the feeling is mutual."

Piers knocked on Jenna's door, and she emerged a minute later, looking tired and dishevelled.

"I am sorry to bother you, but have you seen Alex today?"

"Oh. Right, yeah, he left during the night. I was going to tell you."

"Left? Surely he did not decide to walk - "

"No, it's okay. He asked me to search the camp for Ivan, in case he was already back from Imil, and grab him some spare shoes. He said he really needed to leave, so I went out, and Ivan said he'd gotten back late and assumed we were all asleep. So yeah, we took Alex to Xian, and paid for him to stay a week at the Inn, meals included. We told him what we knew about the place, and introduced him to Master Feh when we ran into him at dawn. Sorry, I should have told you guys. I thought I'd be able to grab a little more sleep before you were up and about."

"I'm glad to hear it went so smoothly. Is Ivan still around? I wanted to speak to Alex before he left."

"Yeah, he's in his room."

"Good. Why don't you have a word with Felix? I think he would be relieved to hear what you have to say."

When they reached Xian, Ivan went to order breakfast at the Inn, and Piers went directly to the dojo. Inside, a class was in session, but he couldn't see Alex anywhere. Feizhi noticed him watching, and came to the door to speak to him.

"Are you looking for Ivan's friend?"

"Yes, he's a friend of mine, too."

"He fainted during the warm up stretches. Father told him to observe and rest today. I think he went to look around the orchard."

Piers found Alex sitting beneath a mulberry tree, watching a few of the dojo's younger students practice outside.

"I hear you've made yourself at home," Piers told him, taking a seat on the grass nearby.

"Hardly." Alex acknowledged him without much of a change in expression. In the light of day, he looked truly ghastly. No wonder Feh had told him to rest.

"I must tell you that Felix sends his apologies."

"Does he, now? It does not matter. Nothing happened."

"He tells me he's made a fool of himself. I suppose you could say he was already a fool."

"True enough."

"I also wanted to introduce you to a couple of djinn." Piers paused to call them out.

"I'm Fog! Do you remember me?"

"My name is Spring. Fog says you're a great painter. Will you paint me next?"

"These two have offered to travel with you, if you'll accept their company. Fog is a decent fighter, and Spring can use healing Psynergy."

"Well? Will you paint me?"

"I'll consider it."

"Thank you!" Spring tried to nuzzle Alex's arm, but he held it at bay with one finger.

"No touching," Alex told them.

"Piers!" Spring whined, turning to appeal to him.

"You heard him," Piers answered. "I will be visiting in a week's time, and I'll want to hear that you've been listening to Alex and making yourselves useful. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Piers."

"We'll be super helpful."

"If you wish to stay for longer than a week, I will also pay to extend your visit," Piers added, over the djinn's heads.

Alex watched as the djinn ran in circles across the grass. He couldn't seem to find a reply.

"Are you honestly happy for them to stay with you?" Piers double checked.

"Yes. They do seem... They will be helpful."

"Good. By the way, I recommend you speak to Feizhi while you are here. Ask her how she learned her Psynergy."

Alex frowned at that, but he nodded after a second.

"Is there anything you'd like to discuss before I leave?" Piers asked.

"Actually... Yes, there is one thing." Alex took a minute to frame the question. "I have heard that Lemurians are long lived. I assumed Lemuria had its own equivalent of the Water of Hermes, to preserve its citizens' health into old age. If that is the explanation, I might be wrong in thinking that you seem... I could swear you have more life experience than the others. Would you mind if I ask your age to satisfy those questions?"

"My teammates have not stopped asking me about my age ever since they visited Lemuria. I have only told Felix, and that is only because we are a couple. However... I think you can keep a secret." Piers glanced around conspiratorially. "In a few weeks, I will be one hundred and fourteen."

Alex stared in surprise, then shook his head with a slight laugh.

"I am telling the truth," Piers protested. "Most of my countrymen are older."

"Oh, I did not doubt you. It is merely... You are almost a century my senior, and I called you an amateur."

"I have not trained as intensively as you in certain areas of skill. You could claim that you were partly right. Besides, our longevity does come from something in the water. You could call it our equivalent to the Water of Hermes."

"Thank you for your generous answer. I will certainly keep your secret."

"In that case, I will see you again soon." Piers wished he could get away with adding something along the lines of *'promise me you will still be alive a week from now'*.

"You will. Please tell Felix that I think him no more of a fool than I ever did. Tell Jenna... tell her good morning, and that I am sorry for all the trouble I have caused. Tell me when it is your birthday, and I will find something to give you in return for everything you have done. And please, if at all possible, do not tell anyone else where I have gone."